

Korolenko's Siberia



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Three Short Stories by
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from the Russian by
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Mrs. T. W. Atkinson: *Recollections of a Siberian Journey*, London 1863.

Introduction

I

I HAVE called this volume "Korolenko's Siberia". It is not a representative collection of stories intended to introduce and display to advantage an author virtually unknown in this country. It is offered to the reader as the literary product, part fact part fiction, part rough part smooth, of one particular interlude in the author's life. Korolenko spent the years 1879-1885 in transit prisons and in compulsory residence in various barbarous and remote corners of the Russian empire. He was not then a famous Russian writer and journalist. He was, officially at least, a "state criminal". The nature of his crime and the consequences of it I shall try to reconstruct in this introduction which will be mainly the story of Korolenko in Siberia. The stories below may then be read not only for their own merits but also as illuminating the events already described. For all the stories have a common basis. They were all written in exile and they all draw to a very large extent on Korolenko's experiences in exile. Having as their ingredients both poetic fantasy and prosaic reportage they illustrate also the strength and weakness of Korolenko's talent. Both good and bad are plain to see. Because it seems to me that the good is admirable (and "Makar's Dream" undoubtedly ranks with the best Russian short stories) while the less good is

never without interest, I have prepared these translations with the hope that they will appeal to those already familiar with Russian literature and in addition to a wider public with a taste for unusual characters in unusual surroundings.

II

Vladimir Galaktionovich Korolenko was born in the Ukraine in 1853 and survived the Bolshevik revolution by four years. He came of a family of impoverished gentry, a Polish Catholic mother and a Russian Orthodox father, by profession a provincial judge, and was in his eighth year at the time of the emancipation of the serfs—perhaps the most conspicuous landmark in Russian history since the reign of Peter the Great. His boyhood coincided in the 1860's with the age of the great reforms when the "Tsar-Liberator" Alexander II, who had freed the serfs, encouraged, or at least tolerated, radical innovations in local government and the system of public justice and relaxed for a time the press censorship. Unfortunately for himself, however, the Tsar overlooked the historically important fact that concessions by a dictator are not received with thanks but only with the demand for more concessions. The reforms left many grievances untouched and created many more. The peasants were free but grossly overtaxed. There were new law courts but they were not always used. There was reformed local government but it had to be paid for, and paid for largely by the

peasants. Before long discontent was publicly expressed. Revolutionary slogans were mouthed. Sinister new words like "nihilism" were bandied about. A few printed manifestoes preached the violent overthrow of autocracy. For thoughtful men and women both reform and the reaction to it served to focus attention on the fundamental tragedy of Russian history—the total economic and cultural alienation of the nobility, the professional classes, the intelligentsia on the one hand, from the overwhelming majority of the people, the *narod*, on the other. In the 1860's and especially the 1870's interest in the "people" was aroused to an unprecedented extent among educated classes of society. This interest was more than academic. The various forms it took are loosely grouped under the term *narodnichestvo* or "populism", and since Korolenko is sometimes referred to as a *narodnik* ("populist") writer and since he certainly suffered for the sins of the *narodniki*, some mention must be made of the theories and and practices associated with populism—the outstanding social phenomenon of Korolenko's student days.

In its widest sense *narodnichestvo* embraces two very different groups of people—those who believed that the peasant, through no fault of his own, was ignorant and underprivileged, and that they could and must enlighten him; and those who regarded him as unspoiled by civilisation, unsophisticated and full of native wisdom—in short the fount of enlightenment to the educated. In so far as he was a *narodnik*, Korolenko belongs to the first group. Tolstoy and Dostoyevsky, the greatest of the Russian novelists,

incline rather to the second. We will overlook the theoretical aspect of *narodnichestvo* which was concerned with the question whether Russia could bypass the stage of capitalism and proceed direct from feudalism to socialism on the strength of certain communal peasant institutions. What we have to dwell on is *revolutionary narodnichestvo*, which belongs almost exclusively to the 1870's. When we think of the *narodniki* of the early 1870's we think first of all of Bakunin and Lavrov. It was they who were directly responsible for launching the popular revolutionary crusade in Russia, termed after Bakunin the "going to the people", which touched off a series of reactions culminating in open terrorism and the murder of the Tsar in 1881. The impetuous Bakunin, accustomed to "mistaking the second month of pregnancy for the ninth", issued from his place of exile in Switzerland the challenge to the youth of Russia to destroy the state. The youth were to be the shock troops of anarchy, promoting insurrection in the villages, convincing the people of their invincible strength if they would only unite and rise together. The revolution must be in the first instance the work of a small conspiratorial nucleus but could only succeed with the full support of the people. No preparation was needed. Preliminary propaganda was a waste of time. Bakunin's views, however, were not shared by Lavrov, another well-born intellectual emigré, also a revolutionist, who wrote and argued that only the man or woman armed with knowledge and understanding of the people's needs and ready to become manual workers should be fitted to undertake the crusade. It was necessary to prepare in order to

mix with the people at their own level, share their work and speak the language they understood. The youth, and particularly the student youth, were more attracted to Lavrov. They were at once encouraged to visit factories and workshops and to learn trades. With a brief training as carpenters, joiners, wheelwrights or cobblers they were soon ready for the crusade. By 1873 the movement to the people was in full swing.

This first revolutionary gesture was an inspiring example of idealistic, heroic, altruistic, misguided and unsuccessful endeavour on the part of many of the best young men and women of the day. Although the movement was widespread it made no real impression. The people did not respond to speeches and pamphlets and quite failed to understand the infiltration of their villages by intellectuals. Crusaders were delivered into the hands of the police by irate villagers. Arrests multiplied. Ranks were thinned. Disillusion spread. Tactics would clearly have to be changed and a permanent body set up to direct revolutionary work from the centre. Such a body was the clandestine revolutionary society "Land and Freedom" founded in 1876. With its headquarters in Petersburg, it had its own administrative council, its intellectual group for revolutionary work among students, its rural group for operating and settling in the villages, its "Heavenly Chancellery" for issuing forged passports and documents and its "disorganisational group" for wrecking purposes. Among its founder members were the Natansons and Aptekman, later to share Korolenko's company in a tiny village in Far Eastern Siberia.

While "Land and Freedom" was gathering strength the tsarist authorities were not idle. The student population of the big university cities was the most likely breeding ground for disaffection. It was here that suspected disloyalty could be nipped in the bud. Korolenko was a student at this time, first at Petersburg and then at Moscow. In Petersburg no more incriminating charge could have been brought against him than his presence out of curiosity at a students' "secret meeting" where a password was needed for admission and where he actually met women with close-cropped hair and cigarettes—indisputable attributes of nihilism. In Moscow, however, he was less discreet. He noticed that government inspectors regularly attended lectures. Students' belongings were searched for illegal literature. His own college authorities seemed to be hand in glove with the police. Under such conditions he ventured to draw up a statement complaining that a recent attempt to arrest a student left him with the impression that his college administrative office was a branch of the Moscow Police Department. In the company of two colleagues who had helped him to compile the draft, and with the signatures of about a third of the student body, he presented the statement. The immediate result was expulsion and imprisonment. Transferred then to Vologda, to the north-east of Moscow, he was given the option of returning to his birthplace under police supervision or continuing his journey to a remote corner of the Vologda province "in accordance with the sovereign will". In point of fact he was able to obtain permission to be "exiled" to Kronstadt, an

island in the Gulf of Finland, and to live with his mother there within the limits of probation granted to exiles, which allowed him to take up work as a draughtsman but restricted his movements to one place.

Twelve months later, in 1877, he was able to leave Kronstadt for Petersburg and enter the Mining Institute there. But the climate in the capital was not conducive to serious study. "Land and Freedom" was becoming a potent force. The lives of prominent government officials were in jeopardy. Mass trials of propagandists and agitators were taking place, including the famous Trial of the 193 which sent a dozen victims to penal servitude and many more to Siberian exile on the charge of conducting revolutionary propaganda in the empire. In 1878 Vera Zasulich shot at and seriously wounded the Governor of Petersburg. Her trial, acquittal and easy escape from Russia caused a sensation at the time. It was perhaps this surprise verdict of a court of justice which induced the government to resort on a wide scale to a method of by-passing legitimate trials by jury which it had already used more sparingly in case of need—the method of administrative exile. By this method the government was able to exile on suspicion and without formal trial any persons thought to be politically unreliable. The method was officially justified as follows:

"Administrative exile as a preventive measure has been normally used in cases where for various reasons a court trial was impossible, and consequently served only one purpose: to remove the person concerned

from his sphere of activity, to place him in surroundings where he should not be able to exert his harmful influence on his neighbours and where at the same time he should himself be free from the influence of that environment which made him a dangerous character. In pursuit of this purpose the government has chosen Siberia as the place of detention for administrative exiles”.

Frequent use was made of this measure during the years following the organisation of “Land and Freedom”. Since it was directed not only against political suspects but also against their families and friends of their families, it was perhaps inevitable that Korolenko as a student in the capital should himself become a victim. From a reading of his autobiographical “History of My Contemporary” and the reminiscences of his friends it is clear that he was both by temperament and conviction opposed alike to revolutionary terrorism and revolutionary propaganda. Never a man of strong political opinions, his imagination was fired by the appeal to serve the people; but his *narodnik* sympathies were those of the peaceful propagandist, the student, the observer. It would be difficult to bring against him any evidence of subversive conduct other than a brief apprenticeship in cobbling while in Petersburg. But his many friends and acquaintances included the Ivanovsky sisters, one of whom he was later to marry. P. S. Ivanovsky, the daughter of a village priest, went to Petersburg in the 1870's to study and equip herself for work among the people. Having joined forces with a *narodnik* group in Odessa, she worked in a village school, a rope factory and a cobbler's shop,

met many of the leading members of "Land and Freedom", and shortly after the collapse of that organisation in 1879 allied herself to one of the two emergent groups, the revolutionary and terrorist "People's Will". She was directly concerned with the assassination of Alexander II engineered by this group, acted as housekeeper for the assassins, worked on a secret printing press and devoted herself entirely to the revolutionary cause. Reprieved from a death sentence, she endured twenty years penal servitude in Siberia before escaping to European Russia, where renewed activity with the Social Revolutionaries, the successors of the "People's Will" who were at the time planning the murder of the Minister of the Interior, brought her fresh adventures before her return to prison in 1905. An amnesty in the same year enabled her to regain her freedom and after some years abroad she finally settled down in Poltava with her sister who had married Korolenko. She is invariably remembered as a simple, modest and kind-hearted woman.

There is no evidence to show that a nodding acquaintance with the Ivanovskys had any bearing on Korolenko's fate. However, in 1878, when Kravchinsky, who as Stepniak may be known to English readers and who translated Korolenko's "Blind Musician" into English, murdered in broad daylight the Petersburg Chief of Police, the Korolenko's flat was searched the same evening and he and his brother arrested. Nothing was found to incriminate them at all and they were soon released. Further searches followed in 1878-1879 with similar negative results, but as the internal situation deteriorated it

was clear that the absence of any formal charge would not prevent measures being taken against the Korolenko family. That the measures actually taken would be so severe could hardly have been foreseen by Korolenko when he was arrested once again in February, 1879.

For two months he was detained in prison. His attempts to discover why he had been arrested were ignored or else dismissed as encroaching on state secrets. In May he was moved to Glazov in the Vyatka province by "administrative order". Here, still in European Russia, he was able to set up a cobbler's shop and he looked forward with pleasure to the prospect of studying the life of the people. But it was not long before he was banished at the caprice of the authorities to the barbarous locality of Berezovskiye Pochinki—the collective name for a few wooden shacks scattered some miles apart from each other in a desolate wilderness and previously reserved for the most dangerous criminals. Korolenko was warned about it. "A brutal climate, nothing but forest all round, more than a dozen miles from shack to shack and nothing to buy with your money. The natives are savage. Exiles simply disappear.' So they saw me off with tears as though I was bound for the next world." No roads led to this "next world". Travel was by sledge over the snow in winter or by boat dragged over land from river to river. The hut where Korolenko lived at first had a stove but no chimney, was black with soot and infested with cockroaches. "We are freezing out the cockroaches at the moment", he wrote to his brother, "that is, we've moved with our belongings to another hut, tiny,

uncomfortable and black with fumes. The stove here has no chimney. As soon as it was lit we opened the doors wide and let in the bitter frost. Our legs are positively numb with cold, while head-high there is a dense, acrid smoke. Until the smoke has cleared and the stove warms up, work is out of the question. However, all this unpleasant business is only temporary—we'll soon be back in our old hut which is more roomy and warmer, though also without a chimney". Korolenko might have added that there was not even a kerosene lamp to light the hut, although it was winter.

We have been left a tribute to Korolenko's unfailing good spirits and kindness of heart by another involuntary resident in the neighbourhood, E. L. Ulanovsky, a young girl of good family who was at the time not only innocent of any attachment to revolutionary circles but quite without political sympathies of any sort. Writing from Berezovskiye Pochinki she says:

"Mother dear, I am no longer alone. I have just come over to the master's hut to get warm. The water in my hut is frozen and I could hardly bear to sit on the boards where I sleep. But the master came across and said: 'there's a guest to see you in the hut'. I ran across the yard and opened the door. There was someone sitting on the bench. He offered me his hand in a friendly way. We said hello and sat down. I can't tell you how wonderful it was. At first we were rather quiet. Then questions and stories came tumbling out, we interrupted each other, asked more questions. He hadn't been able to sleep all night when he heard that a young woman had been

sent here and he tried to imagine his sister in my place. He's been living for a fortnight in a hut some five miles away, living with the peasants, eating out of the same bowl, making and repairing shoes and slippers. Now I really am well off mother, with a father, brother and friend all in one."

Ulanovsky, however, was not to enjoy his company for long. By February, 1880, Korolenko was en route for Siberia on a fabricated charge of attempted escape from Berezovskiye Pochinki. When in time he came to learn of the charge he was understandably angry at the misrepresentation of what had in fact been a short journey to a neighbouring village to buy shoe leather.

Confined for nearly six months in Vyshny Volochek Prison to the north-west of Moscow, Korolenko was subjected to a harsh regime which forbade all books, paper, pen and pencil to "politicals" and gave them no opportunity of privately supplementing prison rations. In his "History of My Contemporary", Korolenko never dwells on the physical and mental hardships of his imprisonment here, preferring to reminisce over the obstacle races and blindfold competitions held in the corridors during exercise hours and the "readings" given in the cells which, as there were no books, were improvisations of a chapter of a story by each prisoner in turn. While in a communal cell in Vyshny Volochek he was able to overcome both the disturbing effect of constant company and the ban on the use of writing materials to compose and read with great success a short story he dedicated to Ulanovsky. A fellow prisoner describes his appearance at the time in the following words :

“Always full of life and activity, a well-proportioned but thick set young man with a great unruly shock of curly dark brown hair covering his large head and descending in waves almost to his shoulders, a broad bushy beard and dark twinkling eyes which sometimes expressed a peculiarly intense concentration, a white cotton shirt such as prisoners wore or a grey cloth blouse, thin belt and jack-boots—that is the Korolenko I remember in those days”.

It was at Vyshny Volochek that Korolenko learned of his ultimate destination—the Yakutsk province in Far Eastern Siberia. It was of course in the days before the Trans-Siberian Railway, and the prisoners had necessarily to trudge on foot for great tracts of the journey. But in Korolenko’s case, the journey was unexpectedly cut short at Omsk by the news that he was to be sent back to European Russia. His brief detention at Tobolsk prison on his return provided him with the material for the short story “Yashka”, translated below.

In September, 1880, he arrived at Perm, not far west of the Urals, and there he was allowed to live in comparative freedom on parole. Although still in exile and unable to leave the town he was nevertheless able to publish “Yashka” which was a record of his own prison experiences and even to have a letter printed in one of the Russian newspapers accusing the authorities of fabricating the statement of his attempted escape from Berezovskiye Pochinki! The Governor of Perm read “Yashka” with great interest and actually offered the author a transfer to the factory village where Yashka had worked before his imprisonment, in order to make a study of the

dissentient sect to which he had belonged. It appears that this offer was not accepted. Possibly it came too late, for Korolenko's fortunes which had been steadily improving soon took a turn for the worse. In March, 1881, Alexander II was assassinated. An oath of loyalty to his successor was demanded of the political prisoners, but although Korolenko was present at a mass meeting where the reading of the oath was taken to be binding, he was later asked to swear individual allegiance, and this after some considerable hesitation he refused to do. As he awaited the consequences he received an unexpected visit from the notorious revolutionary, Y. Bogdanovich, a ringleader in the tsaricide plot, who had heard of his defiance and now proposed that he should escape from Perm and devote himself to the revolutionary cause. Again Korolenko refused. For not only was terrorism abhorrent to him: he had also given his word not to escape to the Governor of Perm, and he considered his word binding in all circumstances. In August, 1881, he was arrested once more, and this time there was no question of administrative clemency.

III

The journey across Siberia with stops in transit prisons took nearly four months. Tomsk provided new material for Korolenko's notebook, for here in the prison chapel he made the acquaintance of an alleged disciple of the *Pokayannik* (Penitent) sect, who

was subsequently to appear in "Killer", the main theme of which was suggested to him later in his journey by a meeting with a young driver who had taken upon himself a cross by voluntarily renouncing the world and seeking asylum in a prison cell.

"I am bound for Siberia", he wrote en route. "It's a big place of course and I don't know where I shall end up. But I have no qualms. It's a nuisance to have to make a journey like this, goodness knows what for, but since I've no alternative there's no use bemoaning the fact. Wherever fate sends me I shall work, and that work will give me strength to endure till freedom and better days. It's nothing terrible, just a nuisance".

Just how great a nuisance it was we shall never fully know, since much of his correspondence from Siberia has been lost, and we rely for our information on a feeble, rambling and not always accurate section of the "History of My Contemporary" written when Korolenko was seriously ill, a handful of letters and diary entries, and the reminiscences and tributes recorded many years afterwards by his fellow exiles. But let us try to reconstruct the picture.

The ultimate destination, and the home of Korolenko for the next three years, was a tiny village some 250 miles south-east of Yakutsk, the settlement of Amga, which boasted officially of a church, two shops and a post office. This is the village which forms the background to "Makar's Dream", isolated in the vast *taiga* or dense coniferous forest belt, with winter temperatures of 40 degrees below zero and the danger of frost in June. The immediate neighbourhood of Amga was inhabited by native Yakuts,

Tartars and some Russian settlers hardly distinguishable from the native population. Over a period of more than 30 years there were less than 300 "politicals" banished to Yakutia, and only a handful were actually billeted in or around Amga. Even here, however, their contaminating influence was still feared, for they were expressly forbidden to engage in any sort of teaching, including the teaching of children, to take up any employment in government institutions or to practise medicine even though fully qualified. With certain other exceptions they were allowed to earn their living as best they could. In practice agriculture, despite the exceptionally unfavourable climatic conditions, had to be the means of livelihood for the physically strong and weak alike, and it was the government policy to grant exiles a considerable allotment of land wherever local conditions and the co-operation of the natives made it possible. While exiles were permitted to take up certain crafts, lack of equipment and the absence of a market for finished products meant that such work was quite unsuitable as a means of income. The government grant to political exiles was so small that manual labour was absolutely essential to support the very lowest standard of living, and yet it is a tribute to these "state criminals", often intellectuals with little practical ability, that in an atmosphere which produced mental lethargy, pathological disorders, insanity and suicide, they were nevertheless able to carry out scientific investigation, to practise literature and to further knowledge. To the researches of these involuntary emigrés are due collections of local flora and fauna,

meteorological studies, ethnographical essays, a grammar and dictionary of the Yakut language and a number of short stories by the Polish writer and ethnographer Sieroszewski and by Korolenko.

Some of the details of Korolenko's life in Amga may be pieced together from the following extracts of a letter to his brother :

"Here in a few lines is my mode of life. The Yakutsk province! By no means as terrible or as cold as you might imagine, however. True there are more than 40 degrees of frost at the moment, but with acclimatisation and especially with quilted breeches and warm *torbasa* (the local footwear), life is possible, the more so as frosts like this don't last long.

"It is evening now. My fellow lodger Papin and I are sitting in our *yurta*. It is virutally our own house. There is a stove in the middle of it with a fire crackling the whole time. Instead of windows there are sheets of ice which are quite attractive all the same and provide enough light in the daytime (more so than glass which freezes over solidly). We are writing letters for the post the day after tomorrow and boiling potatoes on the stove—the produce of our own garden.

"In winter I make shoes. In summer we work on the land, and quite successfully this last year too. We have enough corn to feed us till the new year. So you see I've learned to plough, harrow, mow and even reap (the latter not too well). Still it's not so difficult now. We ploughed up 14 *poods* of land ourselves and we got from it over a 100 *poods* of grain of different sorts. We made quite a bit of hay

too. I have my own horse, and our comrade Weinstein who is now on military service in Yakutsk has another one. I've learned to ride, harness a horse and load a cart of hay, and I get about perfectly on horseback. It's not a bad life here, you can see, though it's not so pleasant in the *uluses* (outlying settlements) as it is in Amga.

"No joking, I feel in wonderful form as you can well imagine. The work is healthy, particularly in summer. Sometimes we spend weeks on end hay-making a few miles up the river in a *balagan* made of grass and osiers. It's hard work at times, but that doesn't hurt. The hardest work of all is reaping. Ploughing isn't difficult, especially if the horses are well trained, but mowing is very tiring. We do our own cooking and I can now bake pretty decent bread. Apart from these occupations we catch a few hares in the taiga by means of so-called *plashchki* or logs arranged by a system of levers to form a trap. This is mostly done in autumn however. In spring we put *mordy* (creels) in the river to catch fish. Unfortunately the Tartars of whom there are a great many here see them more often than we do".

This may help to illustrate one aspect of Korolenko's life in exile, described it is true in an exaggeratedly favourable manner by a man who would never admit even to his closest relatives that he ever suffered in Siberia anything worse than a temporary inconvenience usually compensated by some novel and rewarding experience. But indeed it was only the company of fellow exiles which broke the utter monotony of life in Amga. Papin who shared Korolenko's first billet in Amga came from

the gentry and had studied law in Moscow and medicine in Petersburg. An early propagandist and agitator, he had been arrested in 1873 on charges of inciting the peasants to revolt and had suffered several years penal servitude in the most notorious of the central prisons before arriving in Yakutia. His devotion to his room-mate and right-hand man was boundless. When Korolenko parted company with Papin to enjoy the greater privacy of a room of his own, his place in the Papin establishment was taken by Dr. Aptekman. Aptekman is widely known in Russia for his history of revolutionary *narod-nichestvo* written in draft form while in Amga, but before this he had had an important and exciting career as a *narodnik* propagandist, a founder member of "Land and Freedom" and a prisoner in the Peter and Paul fortress. In his reminiscences of Korolenko he pays tribute especially to his remarkable versatility and to his prowess as a raconteur. Besides the tiny group of exiles actually resident in Amga during the years 1881-1884, Korolenko was also able to meet and converse with some of the more numerous *ulusniki* residing in outlying areas and visiting the village from time to time. Some of them like Mark Natanson, the moving spirit behind "Land and Freedom", were great names in the history of the revolutionary movement in Russia. Some had played more modest roles. Some are of interest chiefly because of the drama of their personal lives. E. N. Yuzhakov for example, was a typical phenomenon of the 1870's in that being born of an aristocratic family (she was a general's daughter) and receiving her education abroad she came under

the influence of the ideas preached by the revolutionary emigré circles in Zurich, returned home and divided her time between revolutionary propaganda and agitation in the south of Russia and her work as a sister of mercy during the Serbian and Russian wars against the Turks. Sentenced to 15 years penal servitude, she was transported to Siberia where in prison at Irkutsk she first met I. A. Bachin, a manual labourer who had graduated by way of the *narodnik* crusade and the Peter and Paul Fortress and who had made his own way to Irkutsk with a false passport to try and free Mark Natanson. The cultured lady of gentle birth and the uneducated labourer had at least one thing in common—the will to escape—and this they contrived to do together, taking up work in a Siberian factory and living as man and wife under an assumed name to avoid suspicion. When eventually they were both captured and imprisoned again, it was discovered that Yuzhakov was pregnant. To legitimise her child she appears against all advice to have married Bachin and to have been sent with him to live in a Yakut *ulus*. But their partnership was a stormy and unhappy one. Yuzhakov despised her husband's boorishness and violent temper while he resented her aristocratic birth and education. In a momentary fit of violence Bachin strangled his wife and committed suicide. A tragedy which touched Korolenko more directly was the suicide of A. P. Pavlov who lived in exile near Amga and maintained contact with the Amga circle. He was a self-educated man, a Petersburg worker and disciple of the Khalturin who had engineered the Winter Palace explosion in 1879 in an abortive

attempt to kill the Tsar. Korolenko and Pavlov had at first collaborated in a plan to escape from Siberia. But this plan had to be abandoned, and after Korolenko's withdrawal from the scheme Pavlov became more and more a victim of morbidity and loneliness. In the end he shot himself in the little hut to which he had retired from the company of his fellows.

But while these personal dramas of his own and neighbouring communities inevitably left their mark on Korolenko, he does not dwell on them but strives rather to convey the communal spirit which united the tiny colony and manifested itself in social gatherings for the purpose of conversation, discussion, recitation or simply relaxation. We have a fragmentary picture of him surrounded by his fellow exiles reading "Killer" or "Makar's Dream" to an enthusiastic audience; of the poet Orlov passing off other poets' verses as his own; of the leaders of revolutionary *narodnichestvo* debating their mistakes and planning their future programmes. Aptekman says of these informal evening gatherings:

"For us they took the place of the family. Here we found rest, peace, spiritual comfort, here we shared our thoughts, hopes and aspirations, examining ourselves and deriving strength and support for the long life of captivity still in store for many of us. Here we came out with our first literary experiments. Korolenko read to us "Makar's Dream" and the "Sakhalin Convict", Sieroszewski his first Yakut essays; Witaszewski acquainted us with his interesting notes on common law. I read my reminiscences of "Land and Freedom", Natanson supplemented

them with important points of his own. As usually happens we moved on from the particular to the general. Problems of "ideology", "strategy and tactics" were raised. Much time was lost and many lances broken over the role and importance in the revolutionary struggle of sectarianism, the commune, capitalism in Russia. But above all we debated the burning questions of terror, systematic terror, and the political struggle in the widest sense of the term."

These meetings were usually held at Aptekman's billet which Korolenko had left for an uninhabited *yrta* at the end of the village where he could live and study undisturbed. Some months after his first move he changed his quarters again. His new host, Zakhar Tsykunov, is the Makar of "Makar's Dream".

Zakhar lived in a tiny *yrta* with his Yakut wife and child. Its sloping sides leaned against the walls of a Russian type *izba*, a flat-roofed upright hut. Zakhar and his family had the former, Korolenko the latter. Speaking of his host's accommodation in a letter to his sister, Korolenko says: "Instead of windows it has two small slabs of ice. By its side is a cowshed, the doors of which open into the *yrta* and are never closed—hence the cows get the warmth of the hut and the people get the stench of the cowshed. The chimney flue is open all the time as well and at night the temperature inside is below zero. Amid the cold, gloom and stench people swarm about on workdays and holidays. On workdays the master drinks on his own and his wife beats him for it. On holidays I can hear the two of them coming home from an evening visit both equally drunk and good pals together."

Korolenko gives an amusing description of their habitual quarrels which took place in bed as a rule and which were invariably sung. "The wife would sing that she ought never to have married a Russian peasant. She should have married a Yakut. He would not have drunk so much all on his own and she would have been happier. Zakhar would reply, also in song. Sobbing and swallowing he sang that he might have found a better wife too. But there was no conviction in his voice. Indeed his own transgressions far exceeded anything he could reproach his wife with. Besides he did not sing as fluently as his good lady. His voice would grow quieter and quieter, while her warbling on the other hand became louder and more hysterical. Then he used me as a threat. There's a *Russky* next door who can hear everything, he'd say; he won't let a Yakut woman insult a Russian peasant . . . And all this apparently going on in their sleep. With closed eyes she would sing aloud her grievances; with closed eyes he would respond."

The story has often been told of Zakhar Tsykunov that when he eventually learned that Korolenko had written a tale about him, he grew very proud and used to introduce himself to newly arrived political exiles with the words: "I'm Makar's Dream". An interesting sequel to the history of the family appeared in "Pravda" in 1952. In a review of the new film "Soviet Yakutia", the newspaper's critic congratulated the producer for having introduced to the Soviet public Zakhar's grand-daughter, now a student at an agricultural technical college and a living tribute to the progress of the times.

Besides describing his daily round of manual

labour, Korolenko tells us something too of his leisure time activities. Sometimes he complains of the spate of local weddings and the repeated requests for his services as best man. Sometimes he tells us of evening parties where Yakut girls exercised their talent for spontaneous composition and improvised songs in honour of the exiles. The following song was dedicated to himself:

“In Kamchatka stands a silver tree
And on its second branch a black grouse sits
With fanned out tail.
And in its tail are feathers of great beauty.
Your beard reminds me of the grouse’s tail
and its choicest feathers.
When you draw logs past my house
I go out into the open and I look at you,
But you do not heed me, and I sigh.”

Sometimes too he would attend the social evenings given by the Amga colony of “Skoptsy” (“Castrati”), for his interest in the sects was greater than his abhorrence of the practices of the more radical among them.

Contrary to the impression that may be given by these few meagre references to entertainment and recreation, Korolenko’s life in Amga was a hard one—hard not so much from the purely physical aspect, for he was an exceptionally strong man, but by dint of its circumscribed monotony and paucity of impressions. Yet there is no doubt that he made the most of his limited opportunities. He had the faculty of regarding a long term of arduous exile as something in the nature of an enforced holiday. He contrived to find the hard core of interest in the

commonplace and the routine. He was always ready to expose petty despotism, nepotism, the venality of public officials and in general the abuse of authority by small men who have attained power without wisdom and without responsibility. He was young, idealistic, unfailingly optimistic, and his Siberian stories are an appropriate record of his humanity and his spirit of enquiry.

IV

In order to confine the material in this introduction as far as possible to one theme, no account has been given of Korolenko's later life. For those readers who are interested, a short biographical sketch is given as an appendix at the end of the book. "Makar's Dream" is translated in full. Some slight abridgments have been made in both "Yashka" and "Killer", often only a clause or sentence where some topical reference is made; but in one or two cases a self-contained passage has been omitted.

R. F. C.

Makar's Dream



I

THIS is the dream of poor Makar who lived out in the back of beyond—the sort of man you know who gets all the knocks.

His birthplace—the little village backwater of Chalgan—was buried in the distant Yakut taiga. Makar's parents and grandparents had wrested a

strip of frozen land from the taiga and although the forest, grim and menacing, continued to surround them like a wall they had not despaired. Fences ran across the clearing; hayricks and stooks appeared and little smoky huts sprang up here and there; to crown everything a bell-tower soared heavenwards like an emblem of victory from a hillock in the middle of the settlement. Chalgan had become a large village.

But while Makar's parents and grandparents had been wrestling with the taiga, setting fire to it and hewing it down with the axe, they had gradually grown more savage. They married Yakut women; they adopted the Yakut language and the Yakut manners and customs. The characteristic features of the Great Russian type were fast being obliterated.

In spite of this Makar always remembered that he was a Russian peasant, a native of Chalgan. He was born there, he lived there, and there he intended to die. He was very proud of his status and sometimes referred abusively to others as "pagan Yakuts", although to tell the truth he was no different from the Yakuts himself in habits or in mode of life. He spoke little Russian and that rather badly, clothed himself in animal skins, wore moccasins on his feet, lived as a rule just on pancakes and brick tea, but on holidays and other special occasions gobbled up all the melted butter within arm's reach. He could ride an ox with great skill, and in the event of illness he used to summon the shaman, who would gnash his teeth in demoniacal frenzy and rush at Makar in an endeavour to frighten and drive out of him the sickness that possessed him.

He worked terribly hard, lived miserably, endured hunger and cold. Had he any other thoughts besides the constant concern for pancakes and tea?

Yes, he had.

When he was drunk, he used to weep. "Oh God", he would say, "what a life!" Sometimes he would add that he would like to throw everything up and go away to "the mountain". There he would neither plough nor sow, fell nor cart wood, nor so much as grind grain on a hand-mill. He would merely seek salvation. What this mountain was, or where it was, he did not know exactly; he only knew that this mountain did exist and that it was somewhere far off—so far off that the District Police Inspector himself could not reach him there. He would not pay taxes either, you understand.

When sober he would relinquish these thoughts, aware perhaps of the impossibility of finding such a wonderful mountain; but when drunk he became bolder. He would admit that he might not be able to find the real mountain and might light upon another. "Then I shall be lost" he would say; but nevertheless he was resolved to go. If he did not carry out this intention, it was probably because the Tartar settlers always sold him filthy vodka distilled with cheap tobacco to give it strength, and this quickly knocked the life out of him and made him sick.

II

It was Christmas Eve. Makar knew that the next day was a great festival. He longed for a drink to mark the occasion but there was nothing to get drunk on: the grain had come to an end and he was already in debt to the local merchants and Tartars. However, tomorrow was a great festival; it would be impossible to work; what could he do except get drunk? This thought made him unhappy. What a life! He wouldn't have a single bottle of vodka to drink even on the great winter festival! But a happy thought occurred to him. He got up and put on his tattered fur coat. His wife, a sturdy, muscular woman, remarkably strong and just as remarkably ugly, knew all his artless designs through and through and guessed his intention as usual.

"Where are you off to, you old devil? Off drinking vodka by yourself again?"

"Hold your noise! I'll buy one bottle. We'll drink it together tomorrow." He gave her such a clap on the shoulder that she staggered a little; then he gave a sly wink. Such is a woman's heart: she knew that Makar would cheat her without fail, yet she yielded to the charm of her husband's caress.

He went out, fetched his old piebald horse from the forest clearing, led it by the mane to the sledge and began to harness it. In next to no time they were outside the gates. There the horse stopped, and turning its head, looked enquiringly at Makar,

immersed in thought. Makar gave a tug at the left rein and drove the horse towards the edge of the village.

On the very edge of the village stood a small hut. From its hearth, and from the neighbouring huts, the smoke kept rising higher and higher, enveloping the cold stars and the bright moon in a billowing mass. The flames from the fire glowed merrily and shone out over the lustreless ice-flakes. Outside, all was still.

Foreigners from distant parts lived here. How they came here and what ill winds had borne them to these remote places Makar did not know, nor was he interested, but he liked to do business with them since they did not try to do him down and were not great sticklers for payment.

Makar entered the hut and going straight to the hearth, stretched out his frozen hands towards the fire.

“Cha!”, he said, thereby expressing the cold he felt.

The foreigners were at home. A candle was burning on the table, although they were not working. One man lay on the bed blowing smoke-rings and pensively watching their convolutions, evidently weaving with them the threads of his own thoughts. Another man sat opposite the hearth, also thoughtfully watching the flames leaping up and down the blazing wood.

“Hello”, said Makar, to break the oppressive silence.

Of course he did not know the sorrow in the hearts of these foreigners, the memories that crowded their

minds that evening or the images that appeared to them in the fantastic variegations of fire and smoke. Besides, he had his own worries.

The young man sitting by the hearth raised his head and looked uncertainly at Makar as if he did not recognise him. Then he shook his head and got up quickly from his chair.

“Ah hello, Makar, hello! This is splendid. You’ll drink tea with us?”

Makar liked the offer.

“Tea?” he queried. “That’s fine! That’s fine, brother. Splendid!”

He began to take his things off quickly. He felt more at ease after removing his fur coat and cap, and seeing the hot coals in the samovar already blazing, turned to the young man expansively.

“I must say I like you, honestly! I like you so much—I can’t sleep at night.”

The foreigner turned round and a bitter smile appeared on his face.

“Oh, you like me?” he said. “What’s it you want?”

Makar stopped short.

“There is something”, he replied. “But how did you know? All right. I’ll have a drink of tea and tell you.”

Since Makar had been offered tea by his hosts without asking, he considered it opportune to go further.

“You haven’t any roast, have you? I’m very fond of it,” he said.

“No”.

“Well, never mind”, said Makar in a reassuring

tone. "We'll have some another time, all right?", he queried, "another time?"

"Very well".

Makar now considered that the foreigners owed him a piece of roast meat, and he never left such debts uncollected.

An hour later he got back into his sledge. He had obtained a whole rouble by selling in advance five wagon loads of wood on comparatively reasonable terms. True he had sworn and given his oath that he would not squander this money on drink that day, but he was determined to do so immediately. But what of it? The prospect of pleasure stifled the pangs of conscience. He did not even give a thought to the cruel thrashing that lay in store for him when drunk at the hands of the faithful wife he had deceived.

"Where are you off to, Makar?" shouted the foreigner with a laugh, seeing that Makar's horse, instead of keeping straight on, had turned off to the left in the direction of the Tartars.

"Whoa there! Look where this damned horse is going!", cried Makar, in order to justify himself, tugging hard nevertheless at the left rein and slyly urging on the piebald with the right.

The wise little horse, swishing its tail reproachfully, jogged quietly along in the required direction and soon the scraping of Makar's runners came to a stop by the Tartar gates.

III

Several horses with high Yakut saddles stood tethered by the Tartar gates.

The air in the crowded hut was stifling. The acrid smoke of cheap tobacco hung like a dense cloud, slowly being sucked away up the chimney. Yakut visitors sat at tables and benches; mugs of vodka stood on the tables; groups of card-players were seated here and there. Their faces were sweaty and red. They watched the cards with wild eyes. Money changed from pocket to pocket. A drunken Yakut was sitting on some straw in a corner swaying to and fro, and drawling out an endless song. Wild rasping noises came from his throat as he repeated in various keys that tomorrow was a great festival and that today he was drunk.

Makar paid his money and got a bottle in return. He thrust it underneath his coat and went off to a dark corner, unnoticed by the others. There he poured out mug after mug and drained them one after the other. The vodka was bitter and was diluted for the festival with more than three parts to one of water. On the other hand they had apparently not stinted the tobacco. After each gulp, Makar caught his breath for an instant and purple spots danced before his eyes.

Soon he was drunk. He too sank down on to the straw and clasping his knees with his arms, laid his heavy head upon them. The same silly rasping noises

poured from his throat of their own accord. He sang of the festival next day and of how he had drunk away five wagon loads of wood.

Meanwhile the hut was becoming more and more crowded with the arrival of fresh Yakut visitors who had come to pray and to drink Tartar vodka. The host saw that there would soon be no room for everyone. He got up from the table and glanced round at the company. His gaze penetrated the dark corner and there he saw Makar and the Yakut.

He went up to the Yakut and seizing him by the coat-collar, hurled him out of the hut. Then he went up to Makar. The Tartar showed more respect for him as a local resident: opening the doors wide, he gave the poor wretch such a kick from behind that Makar shot out of the hut and fell nose down into a snow-drift.

It is difficult to say whether he was hurt by this treatment. He felt that there was snow up his sleeves, snow on his face. Picking himself up from the snow-drift as best he could, he staggered off to his horse.

The moon was now up. The tail of the Great Bear had begun to dip downwards. The frost had hardened. In the North the first fiery shafts of the Aurora, flickering palely, appeared fitfully from behind a dark semicircular cloud.

The horse, evidently understanding its master's condition, wended its way cautiously and prudently homewards. Makar sat on the sledge swaying from side to side and continued his song. He sang of how he had drunk up five wagon loads of wood and of how his old woman would beat him. The sounds that

burst from his throat grated and moaned so mournfully and plaintively in the evening air that his friend the foreigner, who had climbed up on the roof of his hut at that moment to close the chimney flue, felt more sad at heart than ever as he listened. Meanwhile the horse had drawn the sledge up to a hillock from where the surrounding country was visible. The expanse of snow shone brightly, bathed in the moon's brilliance. At times the light of the moon seemed to fade and the snow darkened until of a sudden the reflection of the northern lights played upon it. Then it seemed that the snow-capped hills and the taiga came close and then drew back into the distance. There was a snowy clearing on Yamalakh, right on the edge of the taiga, which Makar could make out distinctly; beyond this lay his traps for forest bird and beast.

This altered the train of his thoughts. He began to sing of how a fox had been caught in his trap. He would sell the pelt tomorrow and his old woman would not beat him.

The first chimes of the church bell rang out in the frosty air as Makar went indoors. He told his old woman at once that a fox had been caught in their snare. He quite forgot that the old woman had not been drinking vodka with him, and he was painfully shocked when, regardless of the glad news, she promptly dealt him a hard blow with her foot a little below the base of the spine. Then as he tumbled into bed, she managed to give him a punch in the neck as well.

Over Chalgan meanwhile, the triumphant festive peal rang out far and wide.

IV

He lay on the bed. His head was burning. His inside was on fire. A strong mixture of vodka and tobacco flowed through his veins. Cold streams of melted snow trickled across his face and dripped down his back.

The old woman thought he was asleep. But he was not asleep. He could not get the fox out of his head. He was fully convinced that it had been caught in the trap; he actually knew which one. He could see it—could see it pinned down by the heavy log, burrowing in the snow with its claws, endeavouring to free itself. The moon's rays, stealing into the thick forest, played on its golden fur. Its eyes glittered as it looked at him.

He could stand it no longer, and getting out of bed he made off in the direction of his faithful steed to ride into the taiga.

What? Did the old woman's strong hands really seize hold of his coat-collar and throw him back on to the bed?

No, here he was, out of the village. The runners scraped evenly over the firm snow. Chalgan was left behind. Behind him rang out the triumphant note of the church bell, and over the dark line of the horizon black silhouetted files of Yakut horsemen, hastening to church in their tall pointed fur caps, stood out against the bright sky.

Meanwhile the moon sank low, and a small pale

cloud appeared directly overhead, shining with a fitful phosphorescent glow. It seemed to break up, to distend, to burst into a shower; and from it rays of iridescent light spread rapidly in all directions while the dark semicircular cloud in the North became still darker. It was now black—blackier than the taiga which Makar was approaching.

The road wound through a dense young wood. Hills rose up to the right and to the left. The further it penetrated the taller the trees became. The taiga grew thicker. It stood silent and mysterious. The naked larch trees were trimmed with silver rime. The soft light of the Aurora, seeping through the treetops, spread over the ground, revealing in one place a snowy glade, in another the prone corpses of shattered giants of the forest filmed with snow. A moment—and all was sunk again in a gloom fraught with secrecy and silence.

Makar stopped. A whole network of traps began here, quite close to the road. In the phosphorescent light the low stockade of fallen timber was clearly visible to him; he even saw the first trap—three long heavy beams resting on an upright stake and supported by quite a complicated system of levers and horse-hair ropes.

To be sure, they were other people's traps; but you know a fox could have been caught in other people's traps too. Makar hastily got out of the sledge, and leaving his knowing old horse by the road, listened carefully.

Not a sound in the taiga. Only the triumphant peal of bells floated across as before from the distant and now unseen village.

There was no need to fear. The owner of the traps, Alyosha of Chalgan, Makar's neighbour and sworn foe, was sure to be in church now. Not a single footprint was visible on the even surface of the newly fallen snow.

He set off into the forest—there was nothing to be seen. The snow crunched beneath his feet. The log traps stood in rows, just like rows of cannon with uncovered muzzles, in silent expectation.

He walked backwards and forwards—in vain. He turned back again towards the road.

But what was that? A faint rustle. A reddish coloured fur caught for the moment in a patch of light flashed by in the taiga, so near! Makar clearly saw the fox's pointed ears. Its bushy tail wagged to and fro as though luring Makar on into the forest. It disappeared between the tree trunks in the direction of Makar's traps. Soon a dull and heavy thud echoed throughout the wood. At first it sounded hollow and abrupt; then it seemed to resound beneath the canopy of the taiga and died quietly away in a distant ravine.

Makar's heart beat quickly. It was the trap which had fallen.

He rushed on, breaking his way through the forest. The cold branches smote him across the eyes, sprinkling snow in his face. He stumbled; he caught his breath.

He ran on into the clearing—a clearing he had once made himself. Trees white with frost stood on either side; the path shrank away into the distance below, with the mouth of a large trap guarding the end of it. A few steps to go and. . . .

Suddenly a figure appeared on the path near the trap—appeared and disappeared. Makar recognised Alyosha from Chalgan; he could distinctly make out his small, thick-set stooping figure, and recognised his bear-like gait. It seemed to Makar that Alyosha's evil face looked more luring, and that his large teeth were bared in a wider grin than ever.

Makar was really angry. "The scoundrel!—he's poaching on my traps". True, Makar himself had only just been poaching on Alyosha's traps, but there was a difference. The difference was this that when he poached on other people's traps he felt afraid of being caught; but when other people poached on his traps he felt indignant and itched to lay hands on the offender.

He darted towards the fallen trap. There was the fox. Alyosha with his ambling bear-like gait was making for the same place. Makar had to get there first.

The log from the trap lay on the ground. Under it glistened the red fur of the trapped animal. The fox burrowed in the snow with its claws just as he had seen it do before and it looked at him in just the same way with its keen, burning eyes.

"Don't touch! It's mine!" cried Makar to Alyosha.

"Don't touch! Mine!", Alyosha's voice sounded like an echo.

They both ran up at the same time and, vying with each other in their haste, began to lift the log, releasing the animal from underneath. As the log was raised the fox rose too. It gave a spring, then stopped, looked at both the Chalganites in some derision, then lowering its muzzle, licked the part

which had been jammed by the beam and ran gaily off, wagging its tail in farewell.

Alyosha was on the point of dashing after it but Makar seized him from behind by the tail of his coat.

"Don't touch", he cried. "It's mine"—and off he ran after the fox.

"Don't touch"—Alyosha's voice echoed back once more, and Makar felt Alyosha seize him in turn by the coat and run on ahead again the next moment.

Makar was furious. He forgot about the fox and dashed after Alyosha.

Faster and faster they ran. A branch of a larch tree knocked Alyosha's cap from his head, but he had no time to pick it up. Makar was on him with a cry of rage. But Alyosha had always been more cunning than poor Makar. He stopped suddenly, turned round and lowered his head. Makar received the blow in his stomach and turned a somersault in the snow. As he fell the wretched Alyosha snatched his cap from his head and disappeared into the taiga.

Makar picked himself up slowly. He felt he had definitely come off worst. His spirits were at their lowest ebb. The fox had been in his grasp, and now it seemed to him that it wagged its tail derisively once more in the dark taiga and disappeared for good.

It grew dark. The pale cloud overhead was barely visible. It seemed to melt quietly away, and the dying rays of light poured lazily and wearily from it.

Biting streams of melted snow ran in torrents over Makar's fevered body. The snow had gone up his sleeves and under his coat-collar; it poured down his back and streamed into his boots. That wretch,

Alyosha, had taken his cap. He had lost his gloves somewhere in the chase. Things were in a bad way. The cruel frost does not jest with people who go off into the taiga without gloves and without a cap as Makar knew only too well.

He had been walking for a long time now. According to his calculations he ought to have emerged from the taiga a long time ago and have seen the bell-tower; but here he was still wandering about in circles. The forest, as though by magic, held him fast in its embraces. The same triumphant peal rang out from afar. Makar thought he was walking towards it, but the peal grew more and more remote and as its echoes sounded quieter and quieter, dull despair came into his heart.

He was tired. He was crushed. His legs sank under him. His bruised body ached with a dull pain. His breath caught in his chest. His hands and feet grew numb. His bare head seemed encased in red-hot bands.

"I shall die, I know"—the thought went round and round in his head. But still he kept on.

The taiga was silent. It simply closed about him with a sort of hostile implacability and offered no opening, no hope anywhere.

"I shall die, I know", Makar kept on thinking.

His strength left him completely. Now the saplings smote him openly across the face without constraint, jeering at his helpless state. In one place a white hare ran out into a clearing, squatted on its hind legs, waggled its long black-tipped ears and began to wash itself, pulling the most impudent faces at him. It was giving Makar to understand that it

knew him very well—knew that he was the self-same Makar who rigged up cunning contrivances in the taiga, for its (the hare's) destruction. But now it had the laugh over him.

Makar was thoroughly miserable. To make things worse the taiga was coming more and more to life—malevolent life. Now even the distant trees stretched out their long branches across his path and seized him by the hair, smote his eyes and face. Woodcocks came out of their coverts and fixed their curious round eyes upon him; ptarmigans raced in and out among them with tails spread and angrily extended wings and chattered loudly to their mates about Makar and his tricks. To crown everything thousands of foxes' muzzles bobbed up in the distant thickets. They sniffed the air and looked derisively at Makar, pricking up their sharp ears. And the hares crouched in front of them on their hind legs and laughed, proclaiming the news that Makar was lost and would never escape from the taiga.

This was too much.

"I shall die", thought Makar and resolved to do so without delay.

He lay down in the snow.

The frost grew more severe. The last rays of light glimmered faintly and spread across the sky, looking down at Makar through the tree-tops. The last echoes of a bell floated across from distant Chalgan. The light flared up and went out. The sound of the bell ceased.

And Makar died.

V

He did not notice how it had happened. He knew something should come of it and he waited for it to come; but nothing did.

However, he was aware that he was dead and therefore lay quietly without moving. He lay for a long time—so long that he became bored.

It was completely dark when Makar felt somebody prodding him with his foot. He turned his head and opened his eyes.

The larch trees now stood over him quietly and meekly as though ashamed of their earlier pranks. The tousled fir-trees spread out their long, snow-covered arms and swayed ever so gently. Star-shaped snowflakes hovered just as gently in the air.

Through the dense branches the bright kindly stars looked down from the blue sky and seemed to say: "Look, do you see, a poor man has died".

Over Makar's body, prodding him with his foot, stood the old priest Ivan. His long cassock was covered in snow; there was snow on his fur cap, on his shoulders and in his long beard. But most remarkable of all was the fact that this was the same priest Ivan who had died four years ago.

He had been a good priest. He never pressed Makar for payment of his tithe, never even asked for money for performing ceremonies. Makar himself fixed the sum for christenings and thanksgivings, and now recalled with shame that he had sometimes paid

too little and at times had paid nothing at all. Ivan had not resented this; one request he did make—namely to be given a bottle of vodka on each occasion. If Makar had no money, Ivan himself sent for a bottle, and they drank together. The priest would invariably drink himself into a stupor, but for all that he fought very seldom and never violently. Makar would take him home, helpless and defenceless, to the care of his wife.

Yes, he had been a good priest, but he died a terrible death. Once when everyone was out and the drunken priest lay alone on his bed, he thought he would have a smoke. He got up and staggered over to the large roasting hot fire-place to light his pipe in the fire. But he was too drunk; he stumbled over and fell into the fire. When the members of the household arrived only the priest's legs remained.

Everyone was sorry for the good priest Ivan; but since only his legs remained, no doctor in the world could cure him. His legs were buried and another priest appointed in his place.

Now the priest, safe and sound again, stood over Makar and tapped him with his foot.

“Get up, Makar”, he said. “Let's go”.

“Where to?” Makar asked in a disgruntled mood. He supposed that once he had dropped down dead, his duty was to lie still and there was no need for him to wander aimlessly over the taiga again. Otherwise what was the point of dying?

“We're going to the great Toyon”.¹

“What for?”, Makar asked.

¹ Toyon—lord or master.

“To be judged”, said the priest in a sorrowful and rather pitying voice.

Makar remembered that after death it was indeed necessary to go somewhere for judgement. He had once heard so in church. So the priest was right. He had to get up.

And Makar got up, muttering to himself that a man was given no peace even after death.

The priest went on in front and Makar followed him. They kept straight ahead. The larch trees withdrew gently, allowing them to pass. They travelled eastwards.

Makar noticed with astonishment that no tracks were left in the snow behind Ivan. Glancing under his own feet he could see no tracks either: the snow was as clean and smooth as a table-cloth.

He thought it would be very easy now to poach on other people's traps since nobody would know about it: but the priest, evidently guessing his secret thought, turned to him and said:

“That's enough! You don't know what every thought like that will cost you.”

“Well, well”, answered Makar in disgust, “I can't even think now! What's made you so strict these days? Be quiet, will you!”

The priest shook his head and went on.

“Is it far to go?” Makar asked.

“Yes”, replied the priest sadly.

“What's there to eat?” Makar asked again in alarm.

“You've forgotten you're dead”, the priest turned to him and replied, “and you've no need to eat or drink now”.

Makar was not very pleased at this. Of course it's all very well when there's nothing to eat, but then one ought to lie down as he had done once he was dead. But to keep going on and on with nothing to eat seemed to him to make no sense at all. He began to mutter again.

"Stop grumbling!" said the priest.

"All right!" answered Makar in an offended tone of voice, but he continued to complain to himself and to grumble at the bad arrangements: "They make a fellow walk, but tell him he can't eat! Did you ever hear the like?"

He continued to follow the priest in a very disgruntled frame of mind. They walked on for what seemed a very long time. True, Makar had not yet seen the daybreak but judging by the distance it seemed they had been walking for a whole week: so many mountains and ravines, rivers and lakes, had they left behind, so many woods and plains had they crossed. When he looked round he fancied the dark taiga itself was running away from them, while the lofty snow-capped mountains appeared to melt in the darkness of night and quickly disappeared beyond the horizon.

They seemed to be climbing higher and higher. The stars grew larger and brighter. Then from behind the crest of the height to which they had risen appeared the edge of the moon which had set long ago in the valley. It seemed to be moving rapidly away, but Makar and the priest overtook it. Finally it began to rise again above the horizon. They walked on over a very high, level plain.

Now it was light—far lighter than at the beginning

of the night. This, of course, was because they were much nearer the stars. The stars glittered, each as large as an apple, and the moon which resembled the bottom of a large golden cask shone like the sun, illuminating the plain from end to end and making each tiny snow flake stand out clearly.

A multitude of roads ran across the plain, all converging on a single point in the East. People in various costumes and of various appearances were walking and riding along the roads. Suddenly Makar who had been looking closely at one rider in particular turned off the road and ran after him.

“Stop, stop!” cried the priest, but Makar did not even hear. He had recognised a Tartar acquaintance who had robbed him of a piebald horse six years ago. The man had been dead for five years, and here he was astride the very same horse. The horse was simply riding the air. Clouds of snow-dust flew from beneath its hooves and sparkled with the variegated colours of the twinkling stars. Watching this furious gallop, Makar was astonished at being able to catch up with the rider so easily on foot. However, seeing Makar a few strides distant, the Tartar stopped with great readiness. Makar pounced upon him furiously.

“Off to the judge!” he cried. “This is my horse. It’s got a cut on its right ear. The crafty devil, riding on someone else’s horse while its owner walks on foot like a beggar!”

“Wait!” the Tartar retorted. “Don’t go to the judge. It’s your horse, you say? Well take it then! The wretched little beast! I’ve been riding it for

five years now and I've hardly moved. People overtake me on foot; it makes an honest Tartar ashamed, it really does."

And he cocked his leg to dismount but at that moment the priest ran up breathlessly and seized Makar by the hand.

"Miserable man!" he cried, "what are you doing? Don't you see the Tartar's trying to cheat you?"

"Of course he's cheating", cried Makar, waving his hands: "the horse was a good one, fit for a real gentleman. They offered me forty roubles for it after only two winters. No, brother! If you've ruined the horse, I'll cut it up for meat and you'll pay me in straight cash. Do you think because you're a Tartar you can get away with everything?"

Makar was angry and he shouted deliberately in order to attract a crowd, as he had always been afraid of Tartars. But the priest stopped him.

"Be quiet, Makar, be quiet! You keep forgetting you're dead. What do you want a horse for? Besides, don't you see you get along on foot far quicker than the Tartar? Do you want to have to go on riding for thousands of years on end?"

Makar grasped why the Tartar was so willing to give up the horse.

"They're a crooked lot!" he thought, and turned to the Tartar.

"All right then! Go on riding and I'll forgive you, brother."

The Tartar pulled down his cap angrily and whipped the horse. It reared up madly in the air and clouds of snow showered from beneath its

hooves; but while Makar and the priest stood still the Tartar barely moved a foot away from them.

He spat angrily and turned to Makar:

“Say, friend, have you got a leaf of tobacco? I’m dying for a smoke, but I smoked all my tobacco up four years ago”.

“Friend my foot!” Makar replied angrily. “Just fancy—he steals my horse then asks me for tobacco! Don’t expect any sympathy from me, damn you!”

And with these words Makar moved on his way.

“It was wrong of you, you know, not to have given him a leaf of tobacco”, Ivan said to him. “Toyon would have forgiven you no less than a hundred sins for that at the judgement.”

“Why didn’t you tell me that before?” snarled Makar.

“It’s too late to teach you now. You ought to have learned it from your priest when you were alive”.

Makar was angry. He had never seen any sense in priests: they took their tithe, but they never taught you when to give a Tartar a leaf of tobacco to obtain forgiveness of your sins. No joke either, a hundred sins—and all for one leaf! That really was a costly mistake!

“Wait”, he said. “Let’s keep one leaf, and I’ll give the other four to the Tartar. That’ll be four hundred sins.”

“Have a look round”, said the priest.

Makar looked round. Only the desolate white plain lay behind them. For a second the Tartar was visible, no more than a speck in the distance. Makar thought he saw the white dust flying up from under

his horse's hooves, but in another moment even the speck had vanished.

"Well, well", said Makar. "He'll have to do without his tobacco. He's ruined my horse for me, the scoundrel!"

"No", said the priest. "It wasn't his doing. The horse was stolen. Didn't you ever hear from the old folk that you don't get far on a stolen horse?"

Makar had indeed heard this from the old folk, but since he had frequently seen Tartars during his own life-time riding right into town on stolen horses, it was not surprising that he had not believed what they had told him. But now he concluded that even the old folk sometimes speak the truth.

He began to overtake a host of riders on the plain. They were all going as furiously as the first. Their horses flew like the wind, the riders were bathed in sweat, but still Makar overtook them and left them behind.

They were Tartars for the most part, but he also came across natives of Chalgan; a few of the latter were riding stolen oxen and were goading them on with switches.

Makar gave every Tartar an angry look, muttering that he had deserved far worse. But when he met any Chalganites he stopped and chatted good-humouredly with them: thieves or not, they were still friends. Sometimes he even expressed his sympathy by picking up a switch from the roadside and assiduously driving on the oxen and the horses from behind; but no sooner had he taken a few steps than the riders were left behind as barely visible dots on the horizon. The plain seemed endless. They

were constantly overtaking people on foot and on horseback, yet everywhere seemed deserted. There appeared to be hundreds or even thousands of miles between every two travellers.

Among other people Makar fell in with an old man, a stranger to him. That he came from Chalgan was apparent from his face, his clothes and even from his gait, but Makar could not recall ever having seen him before. The old man was wearing a torn fur-coat, a large shaggy fur-cap also torn, old leather breeches and torn calf-skin moccasins. But worst of all—in spite of his age—he was dragging on his shoulders an even older woman whose legs were trailing along the ground. The old man was breathing with difficulty, stumbling along and leaning heavily on a stick. Makar felt sorry for him. He stopped. The old man stopped too.

“Any news?” said Makar affably.

“None”, replied the old man.

“Heard anything?”

“No”.

“Seen anything?”

“No”.

Makar was silent for a while, then thought he might ask the old man who he was and whence he was wending his way.

The old man told him his name. Long ago—he himself did not know how many years it was—he had left Chalgan and gone off to “the mountain” to seek salvation. There he did nothing, ate only cloud-berries and roots, did no ploughing or sowing, ground no grain on the mill-stone and paid no taxes. When he died he came to Toyon for judgement. Toyon

asked who he was and what he had done. He said he had gone to "the mountain" and sought salvation. "Good", said Toyon, "but where is your old woman? Go and bring her here". And he went to fetch his old woman, but she had gone out begging in her old age; there was no one to feed her, and she had no house, no cow and no bread. Her strength had failed her and she could not drag one leg after the other. And now he had to carry the old woman on his back to Toyon.

The old man began to weep but the old woman kicked him as she would an ox and said in a weak but angry voice:

"Get on!"

Makar felt more sorry than ever for the old man and he rejoiced with all his heart that he had not succeeded in going off to "the mountain". His old woman was an enormous size and it would have been even more difficult for him to carry her. And if in addition she had started to kick him like an ox, there was no doubt she would rapidly have driven him a second time into the grave.

Pity prompted him to try and take hold of the old woman's legs and help her up the hill, but he had scarcely gone a couple of paces before he had to let go quickly to prevent them from being left in his hands. The old man and his burden vanished out of sight in a moment.

For the rest of the journey no more people were encountered whom Makar deemed worthy of his special attention. There were thieves laden like pack-animals with stolen goods, plodding on step by step. There were fat Yakut chieftains jogging along

on high tower-like saddles, their tall hats brushing against the clouds. And by their side hopped the poor workers, as skinny and as light as hares. A sombre-looking murderer went by, blood-stained, and with wildly roving eyes. In vain did he throw himself into the pure snow to purge the bloody stains. The snow instantly turned a frothy red, but the blood-stains on the murderer started out more vividly than ever, and in his eyes gleamed wild fear and despair. And on he went, avoiding the frightened gaze of others.

The souls of little children constantly flitted through the air like birds. They flew in large flocks, which did not surprise Makar. The coarse, bad food, the dirt, the fire from the stoves and the cold draughts in the huts drove them away almost by the hundred from Chalgan alone. When they came abreast of the murderer they wheeled far to one side in a startled flock, and the rapid restless beating of their little wings could be heard long afterwards through the air.

Makar could not help noticing that he was moving quite quickly in comparison with the others, and hastened to ascribe this to his virtue.

“What do you think, father?” he said. “Although I liked a drink when I was alive, I was a good man. God loves me.”

He glanced inquiringly at Ivan. He had an ulterior motive. He wanted to sound the old priest a bit. But the latter said curtly:

“Don’t brag! We’re not far off. You’ll soon know for yourself”.

Makar had not previously noticed that day was

beginning to dawn in the plain. First of all, a few dazzling rays shone out over the horizon. They soon spread across the sky and dimmed the bright stars. And the stars died and the moon sank. And the snowy plain grew dark.

Then the mists rose above it and stood round the plain like a guard of honour.

And in one quarter, in the East, the mists grew brighter, like warriors clad in gold.

And then the mists began to stir, the golden warriors bowed down their heads.

And from behind them rose the sun and stood upon their golden backs and surveyed the plain.

And the whole plain shone forth with a dazzling blinding light.

And the mists rose triumphantly in an enormous round, broke up in the West and floated hovering aloft. And it seemed to Makar that he heard a wonderful song. It was the same age-old song with which the earth greets the sun day by day. But Makar had never paid due attention to it before, and only now for the first time did he understand what a wonderful song it was.

He stood and listened and had no wish to go on; wished only to stand there and listen for ever.

But Ivan touched his sleeve.

“Let’s go in”, he said. “We’re there”.

Then Makar saw that they were standing by a great door which the mists had previously concealed.

He did not want to go in at all, but there was nothing for it and he obeyed.

VI

They entered a fine roomy hut, and only as they entered did Makar realize that there had been a keen frost outside. In the middle of the hut stood a stove of wonderfully wrought pure silver, in which golden logs were blazing and giving out a steady heat that ran through his whole body instantly. The fire in this wonderful stove did not sear the eyes or burn, but only gave out warmth, and once more Makar only wished to stand still for ever and warm himself. Ivan also went up to the stove and stretched out his frozen hands towards it.

There were four doors in the hut, of which only one led outside, while young people in long white shirts constantly came in and went out by the others. Makar thought they must be the local Toyon's workmen. It seemed to him that he had seen them somewhere before, but he could not remember exactly where. He was considerably surprised by the fact that each workman had large white wings on his back, and he thought that Toyon probably had other workmen as well, since these with wings certainly would not have been able to break their way through the forests of the taiga to cut logs or firewood.

One of the workmen also went up to the stove, and turning his back towards it began to talk to Ivan:

"Any news?"

"None", answered the priest.

“What did you hear on earth?”

“Nothing”.

“What did you see?”

“Nothing”.

Both were silent for a moment, and then the priest said:

“I’ve brought this man here”.

“Is he from Chalgan?” asked the workman.

“Yes, he’s from Chalgan”.

“Well then, that means we need to get the big scales out”.

And he went off through one of the doors to get things ready, and Makar asked the priest why scales were necessary, and why big ones especially.

“You see”, answered the priest, somewhat embarrassed, “scales are necessary to weigh the good and evil that you have done in your lifetime. In the case of all other people, good and evil approximately balance the pans; only the Chalgan people have so many sins that Toyon has ordered special scales to be made for them with an enormous pan to hold the sins”.

Makar’s heart seemed to sink at these words. He began to quail.

The workmen carried in and set up the large scales. One pan was small and made of gold, the other was wooden and of enormous dimensions. A deep black orifice suddenly yawned beneath the latter.

Makar went up and inspected the scales carefully to make sure there was no deception. But there was no deception. The pans balanced without a tremor.

However, he did not quite understand their construction and would have preferred to be dealing with a steel-yard with which he had mastered the art, in the course of his long life, of buying and selling at a certain profit to himself.

“Toyon is coming”, the priest said suddenly, and started to adjust his cassock hastily.

The middle door opened and Toyon entered—a man far advanced in years and wearing a long silvery beard down below his waist. He was clad in rich furs and fabrics unknown to Makar, and wore on his feet warm boots trimmed with plush such as Makar had seen worn by an old icon-painter.

At the very first glance at the aged Toyon, Makar recognised him as the same old man he had seen represented in church. Only here he had no son with him; Makar surmised that his son had probably gone out on business. Then a dove flew into the room and circling over the old man’s head, perched on his knee. And the aged Toyon sat on a chair specially arranged for him, and stroked the dove with his hand.

Toyon had a kind face and Makar, who was by this time heavy-hearted in the extreme, looked at his face and felt easier.

His heart was heavy because he had suddenly recalled the whole of his life down to the last detail, recalled his every step and every stroke of his axe, and every felled tree, and every fraudulent practice and every glass of vodka drunk.

And shame and fear came upon him. But as he looked into the face of the aged Toyon, he took courage.

And taking courage, he thought that possibly he might succeed in hiding something.

The aged Toyon looked at him and asked who he was, where he was from, what he was called and how old he was.

When Makar had told him, Toyon asked:

“What did you do in your lifetime?”

“You know yourself”, answered Makar “You must have it all written down”.

Makar was sounding the aged Toyon in his desire to find out whether in fact he had it all written down.

“Speak up, don’t be afraid!” said Toyon. And Makar again took courage.

He began to list his work, and although he remembered every stroke of his axe, every log cut up, and every furrow ploughed, nevertheless he added on thousands of logs and hundreds of wagon-loads of firewood, hundreds of stakes and hundreds of pounds of crops sown.

When he had listed them all, the aged Toyon turned to Ivan the priest and said:

“Bring the book here”.

Then Makar saw that Ivan was Toyon’s secretary and was very angry that he had not told him so earlier for friendship’s sake.

Ivan brought the large book, opened it and began to read.

“Have a look how many logs there are down”, said the aged Toyon.

Ivan looked and said sorrowfully:

“He’s added on a whole 13,000”.

“He’s lying”, cried Makar vehemently. “He’s

certainly made a mistake because he's a drunkard and he died a terrible death!"

"Silence!" said the aged Toyon. "Did he take more than he should have done from you for christenings and weddings? Did he force you to pay his tithe?"

"That's nothing to do with it", replied Makar.

"You see I know he was fond of drinking myself", said Toyon. And he grew angry.

"Now read his sins out from the book, because he's deceitful and I don't believe him", he said to Ivan.

But meanwhile the workmen piled Makar's logs and his firewood, and his ploughing and all his work on to the golden pan. And altogether it proved to be so much that the golden pan sank right down while the wooden one rose up and up out of arm's reach; and Toyon's young workmen (a whole hundred of them) flew up and pulled it down with ropes.

The Chalganite had been a hard worker!

Then Ivan started to read out the number of fraudulent acts and this proved to be 21,933; then he started to calculate how many bottles of vodka Makar had drunk, which came to 400; and the priest went on reading and Makar saw that the wooden pan on the scales was outbalancing the golden pan, and that it was sinking into the pit, and even as the priest read it sank lower and lower.

Then Makar thought to himself that things were in a bad way and he went up to the scales and tried to support the pan furtively with his foot. But one of the workmen noticed this and a hue and cry broke out.

“What’s going on there?” asked the aged Toyon.

“This man here was trying to support the scales with his foot”, the workman answered.

Then Toyon turned angrily to Makar and said :

“I see that you are a cheat, an idler and a drunkard. You left behind you arrears of taxes, you owe tithes to the priest, and the police-inspector is continually sinning on your account every time he swears at you!”

And turning to Ivan the aged Toyon asked :

“Who in Chalgan puts the heaviest load on his horses and drives them the furthest?”

Ivan answered :

“The church caretaker. He goes backwards and forwards with the post and drives the police-inspector round”.

Then the aged Toyon said :

“Hand over this idler to the caretaker and let him carry the police-inspector round on his back until he drops. Then we shall see”.

No sooner had Toyon said this than the door opened and his son entered the room and sat down on his right hand. And the son spoke and said :

“I heard your sentence. I lived for a long time on earth and I know what things are like there : it will be hard on this poor man to have to carry the police-inspector round! But so be it! Only perhaps he has something more to say first. Speak up, poor fellow!”

Then something strange happened. Makar, the self-same Makar who had never in his life uttered more than a dozen words consecutively, suddenly experienced the gift of speech. He began to talk and

was amazed. There seemed to be two Makars; one spoke while the other listened in astonishment. He could not believe his own ears. His speech flowed smoothly and vehemently, the words pursuing one another swiftly and ranging themselves into long graceful rows. He was not afraid. If he happened to stumble, he at once corrected himself and shouted twice as loud. But most important—he felt in his own mind that he was speaking convincingly.

The aged Toyon who had been somewhat angered at first by Makar's boldness now began to listen with great attention, as though persuaded that Makar was not such a fool as he had at first seemed. Ivan was actually afraid for a moment and began to tug at Makar's coat, but Makar shook himself free and continued in the same vein. Then even the priest ceased to be afraid and actually broke out into a smile as he saw that his parishioner was boldly uttering the truth and that the truth was dear to the aged Toyon's heart. Even the young people in their long shirts and white wings who lived and worked with Toyon came from their own quarters as far as the door and listened to Makar's speech, nudging one another with their elbows.

He began by saying that he did not wish to be the caretaker's horse. And not because he was afraid of hard work, but because the decision was unjust. And since the decision was unjust he would not obey it, would not even listen to it and would not stir a finger. They could do what they liked to him. They could consign him to hell and to everlasting torture—he would not carry the police-inspector round, because it was unjust. They need not think he was

afraid of being a horse: the caretaker used to goad his horse, but he did feed him on oats; but *he* had been goaded all his life and nobody had fed him on oats.

“Who goaded you?” asked the aged Toyon indignantly.

Yes, goaded all his life! Goaded by bailiffs and overseers, assessors and police-inspectors demanding taxes; goaded by priests demanding tithes; goaded by want and hunger; goaded by heat and cold, rain and drought; goaded by the frozen earth and the malevolent taiga! Cattle walk on staring at the ground, not knowing where they are being driven. It had been just the same with him. Did they think he knew what the priest read in church and what he received his tithe for? Did they think he knew why they had taken his eldest son into the army, or where they had sent him, or where he had died, or where his poor bones now lay?

They said he drank a lot of vodka. It was true of course. His heart craved for vodka.

“How many bottles was it, you say?”

“400”, replied the priest, glancing at the book.

All right! But was it really vodka? Three quarters of it was water, and only a quarter was real vodka—and that distilled with tobacco. Therefore 300 bottles should be struck off the account.

“Is all this true that he’s saying?” the aged Toyon asked Ivan, obviously still angry.

“Absolutely true”, replied the priest promptly, and Makar continued.

He had added on 13,000 logs? Supposing he had. Supposing he had only hewn 16,000. Was that a

trifling amount? And besides, he had hewn 2,000 when his first wife was ill. And he had been heavy at heart, and he had wanted to sit by his old woman's side, but need had driven him into the taiga. And he had wept in the taiga, and the tears had frozen on his eye-lashes and the cold had pierced his very heart with grief. But still he had gone on hewing!

Then the old woman died. She had to be buried, but he had no money. And he hired himself out to cut wood to pay for a home for his wife in the next world. But the merchant had seen that he was in need and had paid him only ten copecks a time. And the old woman lay alone in the frozen hut while he cut more wood and wept. He thought these cart-loads should be counted five times over, and more.

Tears came to the aged Toyon's eyes, and Makar saw that the pans on the scales rocked, and that the wooden one rose while the golden one fell.

But Makar went on: they had everything written down in the book. Suppose they look and see if anyone had ever done him a kindness, shown him affection or brought him happiness; suppose they look and see where his children were? When they died he was broken-hearted; when they lived and grew up they went away to carry on a solitary fight against cruel want. And he and his second wife were left to grow old alone and he saw his strength failing and the approach of pitiless, defenceless old age. They stood like two orphan fir trees in the steppe, lashed on all sides by the cruel snow-storms.

"Is that true?" the aged Toyon asked again. And the priest hastened to reply:

"Absolutely true!"

And the scales quivered once more. But the aged Toyon was immersed in thought.

"Surely", he said, "I have truly righteous men on earth. Their eyes are bright and their faces shining and their clothing is without spot. Their hearts are as soft as good soil: they receive the good seed and bring forth the lily of the field and the fragrant shoots whose scent is pleasant to me. But look at yourself . . ." And all eyes were turned on Makar, and he was ashamed. He felt that his eyes were dim and his face dark, his hair and beard tousled, his clothing torn. And although he had intended long before his death to buy some boots to appear for judgement as a true peasant ought, he had squandered his money on drink, and now stood before Toyon in wretched old moccasins, like the most insignificant Yakut. And he wished the ground would swallow him up.

"Your face is dark", continued the aged Toyon, "your eyes are dim and your clothing torn. Your heart is overgrown with weeds and thorns and bitter wormwood. That is why I love my righteous men and turn my face away from such as you that are ungodly".

Makar's heart shrank. He felt ashamed of his own existence. He started to hang his head, but suddenly he raised it and began again.

Who were these righteous men Toyon was speaking about? If they were those who lived on earth in their rich houses at the same time as himself, then Makar knew them. Their eyes were bright because they had not shed as many tears as Makar, and their face were shining because they were washed with

perfume, and their clean clothing was sewn by other people's hands.

Again Makar hung his head, and again he raised it.

Did he not see that he had been born like the others—with clear, open eyes in which were reflected the heaven and the earth, and with a pure heart ready to lay itself open to all that was beautiful in the world? And if he now wished that the ground would swallow him up with all his misery and shame, it was not his fault. But whose fault was it? That he did not know. But he knew in his heart that his patience was exhausted.

VII

Of course if Makar could have seen the effect his speech produced on the aged Toyon, if he could have seen that every angry word of his fell on the golden pan like a lead weight, he would have set his heart at rest. But he did not see all this because blind despair had overwhelmed his heart.

He looked back over all his bitter life. How could he have borne this terrible burden till now? He had borne it because hope had kept shining ahead of him like a star in the darkness. He was alive, therefore he could and must experience a better lot. Now he stood at the end, and all hope had gone.

Then darkness came upon his soul, and fury raged within it like a storm on a dark night in the desolate steppe. He forgot where he was, before whose

presence he was standing—forgot all except his anger.

But the aged Toyon said to him :

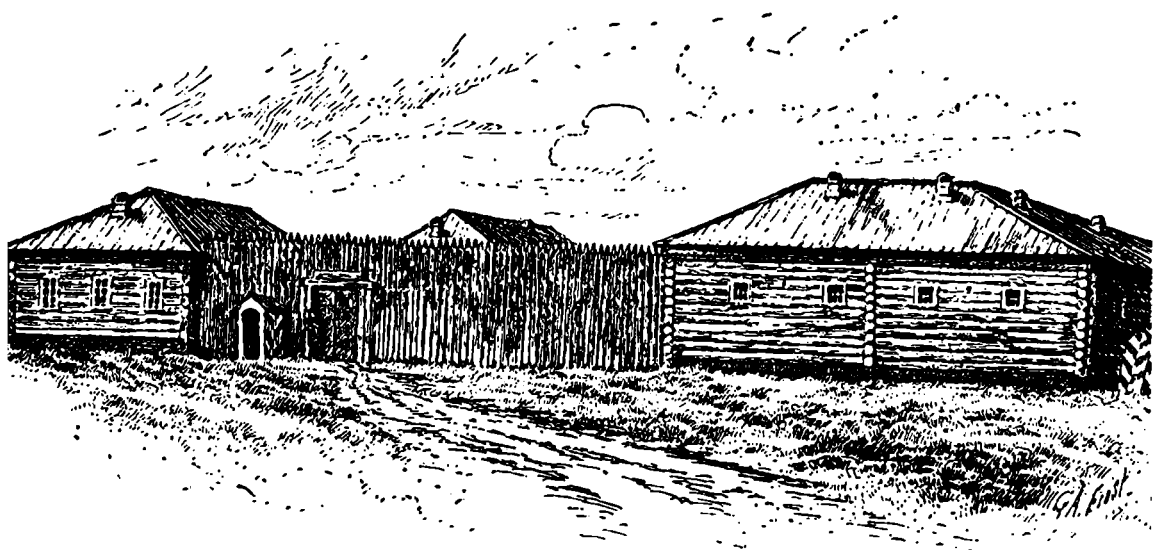
“Wait, poor fellow! You are not on earth. Here you too shall find justice”.

And Makar shuddered. His heart was overcome with the knowledge that they were sorry for him, and it softened; and since his poor life lay bare before his eyes from the first day to the last he became unspeakably sorry for himself too. And he wept.

And the aged Toyon wept also. And the old priest Ivan wept and Toyon’s young workmen shed tears and wiped them with their broad white sleeves.

And the scales kept on rocking, and the wooden pan rose higher and higher still!

Yashka



I

WE were led into the long, narrow, gloomy corridor of a Siberian prison. One wall consisted almost entirely of high windows which looked out on to a small square yard where the prisoners usually exercised. Owing to our arrival they had now been herded into their cells. Along the wall opposite we could see the doors of the "solitaries" quite close to one another. Time and constant use had made them black, and they stood out in sharp relief, dark oblongs against the dirty grey wall. Little plaques hung over the doors labelled "Murder", "Theft", "Assault", "Vagrancy",

and each door had a square glass pane in the middle with a wooden shutter on the outside. All the shutters were open and the watchful, inquisitive eyes of the prisoners peered at us from behind the glass.

We turned two corners. Over the first two doors in the third corridor was the word "Lunatic". There was no plaque on the third door, but I could make out the same word on the fourth. There was no need for a plaque, however, to guess who was the occupant—uncouth, agonising, heart-rending sounds emerged from behind the door. A man was evidently pacing up and down inside, uttering cries which could have been mistaken for a Hebrew prayer, a plaintive funeral dirge or even a barbaric dance tune. When he stopped, and silence fell in the corridor, we could distinguish the monotonous voice of a man chanting a prayer in the first cell. Further on we could see more doors and hear the sound of the regular clanking of chains behind them. The plaques were labelled "Murder".

This was the corridor for those "awaiting trial". We were put there in the absence of any accommodation for people in transit. For the same reason, namely the lack of any special accommodation, three lunatics were imprisoned in the same corridor. Our cell which was not labelled lay between the cells of two of the lunatics, separated by a staircase to the right of one of them over which hung a board saying: "Entrance to Cockloft".

While the gaolers were picking out the keys to unlock our cell, our right-hand neighbour gave no sign of his existence. As far as one could see through

the glass pane it was as dark as the tomb inside his cell.

"Yashka's quiet today", whispered the senior gaoler to the junior.

"He can't see. Don't take any notice of him", the other whispered back.

Two eyes shone behind the glass. I caught a glimpse of the tip of a nose, a thick moustache, part of a beard. Then the door rattled and shook. Yashka kicked the bottom of it so hard that the iron bolts bent and creaked. Each blow reverberated under the high ceiling and echoed down the other corridors. The gaolers winced. The senior of the two, a little, elderly grey-haired Jew who was like an old prison rat to look at, with tiny, piercing evil eyes glinting beneath shaggy brows, shrank back against the wall and glared with bitter hatred and malice in the direction of the offender.

"That's enough, Yashka, what's bitten you?" said the corridor superintendent, an earnest old man with long drooping moustaches and a large fur cap. "See look, prisoners!"

The man called Yashka stared hard at us. Evidently convinced that in spite of our civilian clothes we really were prisoners, he stopped kicking and mumbled something to himself—what it was we could not make out, for we were already in the cold, damp confines of our cell. The bolts were rammed home behind us, the superintendent's steps died away at the far end of the corridor and life for those "awaiting trial" sank back into its normal rut.

Five paces long and three and a half wide—such were the dimensions of our new dwelling. The glass

in our yard-square window was broken and through it we could see the grey prison wall about a dozen feet away. The corners of the cell were lost in semi-darkness. The accumulated dust of many years formed a pall over the cornices; the walls were grey, and a close inspection of them revealed peculiar stains—the mark of some victim's fight against bugs and cockroaches—a stubborn fight, perhaps, of long duration. I could not escape the sensation of a singularly unpleasant smell which seemed to be coming from the walls. Close to the floor a stout iron ring had been fastened into the brick for an obvious purpose: a short chain had once been attached to it. The cell was furnished with two beds, a chair and a small table, such luxury as it had probably never seen before. In the other cells like ours there was nothing except a mattress thrown on the floor and a human being sprawled on top of it.

Outside we could hear the rumbling of a cart. A poor emaciated nag was dragging a box past the window. Two prisoners slouched along behind, their boots squelching through the mud. They stopped close by, let down one side of the box and casually set to work. A repulsive stench wafted through our broken windows and began to fill the room.

My companion who had just laid down on his bed rose to his feet and looked sadly round.

“So—this is it”, he drawled.

“Mm”, I assented.

There was no wish, nor indeed any need, to say more; we understood each other. The dark walls, the cobwebs in the corner, the stout lock on the door looked at us and spoke for us. Noxious vapours

floated in through the window and there was no means of escaping them. How long would we have to stay here—a week, two weeks? Awful! And yet our next door neighbours would not be staying just a week or two. And even in that cell of ours some new occupant would be installed for months and maybe years when we were gone.

The prisoners went on with their job. It was their daily task. Each day they came with their evil-smelling box and spent an hour or two casually filling it and trekking backwards and forwards in front of the row of ill-fitting, and often broken, windows.

We stuffed up our window with a prison pillow. The smell subsided a little, or else we grew inured to it, but what had at first been only an acute feeling of depression brought on by our helplessness and the frustrating silence of our cell now began to change into a permanent state of torpor. We listened to the quiet hum of life outside as it filtered through our stout doors.

Life outside for us was the life of the prison yard and corridor. When our outside shutter was left open we could see the prisoners taking their exercise. They sauntered round the little yard in pairs, noiselessly. Their grey garments seemed to impress upon them the need to be quietly respectable.

At certain fixed hours the order went round: "Fall in for hot water!", "Fall in for bread!", "Dinner up!", "Back to your cells!". Prisoners in strict solitary confinement and convicts in chains were let out for a short time. The latter looked the more imposing as they walked along the corridor; their chains undoubtedly made them so. Towards

evening a bell would ring in another yard, which meant inspection time was near. At seven o'clock each day the warden or his deputy went round all the cells with a sentry officer and an escort, counting the prisoners. And so the day passed for those "awaiting trial".

One, two, three, four—the dull intermittent sound of lusty kicking. It was Yashka, shattering the uneasy silence of the corridor. His abrupt, infuriatingly loud, rebellious blows were in sharp and unpleasant contrast to the silent background of a mute, subdued life. I remembered how the little senior gaoler had cringed as he heard those sounds. The breach of the wonted silence of that unhappy place which struck even me, a newcomer, as discordant, must have been particularly grating to the ears of the authorities.

I don't know why there was any special need for me to count those kicks. One, two, three—the noise grew louder about six; seven, eight, nine—a regular barrage; then at eleven or sometimes twelve it ceased abruptly. Just then I would feel a momentary sensation of pain in my right foot. I imagined that Yashka had stopped kicking because of a similar pain. A few seconds later another five or six blows—after which a strained silence would follow, or else Yashka's sullen mutterings would blend with the Jew's lugubrious incantations.

The man most frequently on duty in our corridor was the old gaoler, who had evidently grown used long ago to the prison and its inmates. The old man, it seemed, had found there that peculiar form of spiritual repose which renders life and human intercourse easier in any profession. He had the

appearance of a man with a reasoned outlook on life, was philosophically composed and invariably even-tempered, never raised his voice, never swore at the prisoners, never cramped their movements unnecessarily. He was the gaoler—that was his social status which imposed certain obligations on him. The rest were prisoners—that again was their social status likewise attended by obligations. Every man ought to fulfil his obligations, which meant: “act decently, behave sensibly—in other words, keep out of the way of the authorities”. Such was the basis of his philosophy, and he was able to make it felt in the life of the section he commanded. His principal rule of conduct—“keep out of the way of the authorities”—pervaded every detail of that life. Old Mick moved and acted unhurriedly, like a well ordered machine. I never saw him argue with a prisoner who wanted a breather, as other gaolers did. He simply went out and opened the door when they knocked. On the other hand, if Mick refused any favour it meant that he had a good reason for it such as the proximity of the watchful eye of the authorities, and his refusal was always firm and absolute. When he used to sit dozing on the window ledge in the corridor with the ends of his long moustaches visible beneath his cap which was permanently pulled down over his eyebrows, and the tip of his hooked nose showing as it twitched peacefully and benevolently in slumber, a free and easy atmosphere and even a certain license began to prevail in the corridor, though of course within the limits permissible in such a place. The prisoners strutted past the gaoler-philosopher with cigarettes in their

mouths, knowing full well they could not be seen like that at any other hour of the day. This made the privilege especially valuable. But they took good care not to run into any of the senior prison officers "like that" or to let old Mick down, since they were well aware that such negligence would be neither "sensible" nor "decent". Even the lunatics felt the commanding influence of Mick's philosophy. When the warblings of the mad Jew with the musical mania reached an excessive pitch of intensity and expression, and when it seemed that his throat would soon refuse to produce any sounds at all and his listeners' ears were in danger of losing the ability to apprehend them, Mick quietly got down from the window ledge, walked across to the Jew's door and jangling a bunch of keys, said in a calm voice:

"Hey, you pig's ear! What's all this hullabulloo?"

The question had a business-like sound about it, as though the questioner thought there really might be some explanation, and even the term "pig's ear" seemed merely an inoffensive proper name. The Jew modified the expression in his voice, lowered his tone and warbled in a way which showed an evident readiness to compromise.

"D'you want the straitjacket?" Mick went on in the same quiet voice, and again the question seemed to imply the possibility of such an unnatural desire on the part of the Jew. "Any more of that row and I'll fetch it, make no mistake about it, chum", Mick assured him, at which the warbling sank to its normal volume.

"Scoffing glass again, eh? D'you think the government put it there for you to eat? You'd a new pane

in yesterday and you've wolfed it down again look, you pig's ear!" Mick picked up the remains of the window pane which the Jew really used to smash and crunch between his teeth.

Having thus reasoned with the Jew, Mick would return to his favourite spot by the window where his back was soon rubbing against the well-worn, grease-stained ledge, his nose and moustaches set at their familiar angle. The Jew would either go on warbling in tones more natural to the human voice, or else start tapping mysteriously on the wall as though communicating to someone the gist of what he had just heard.

The other lunatic, Timoshka the Ostyak, who lived in the first cell at the entrance to our corridor, was in Mick's good graces. As I was going down the corridor one day he pointed to his cell with obvious relish.

"Timoshka's in there—Timothy the Ostyak. A god-fearing man he is. Knows all the prayers in the book. Look, he's praying now".

I looked in. The long narrow cell was even darker than our own, since the corner of an adjacent building blocked out the light. At first I could not distinguish anyone inside those dark walls, but before long I was able to make out a figure kneeling in the corner under the window. Timoshka was swaying slightly as he knelt in front of some obscure wooden images. A fur cap of sorts lay on the window sill. As in the other solitaires, there was no furniture, simply a slop-pail beside the images. The Ostyak was praying in an uncouth voice, but with the measured tones of a practised reader. From time to

time he uttered long sentences in an incomprehensible language, probably Ostyak, and occasionally, without altering his prayerful intonation, pronounced foul words of abuse as though they were part of his cult too.

“Three men he strangled with his own hands”, Mick told me by way of introduction. “Not much to look at he isn’t, but the strength of him—it’s terrific!”

“What has he rigged up in the corner there?” I asked.

“They’re idols—gods. Yes! He makes them himself. Take them away and he only goes and makes more”.

“How?”

“He’s a smart fellow, no mistake! He’s a knife he made out of the window leading, sharpened against a stone. And see his cap there on the window sill? He made that too. The window got broken and in came a stray cat. He caught it and skinned it with his teeth, and—there you are—a fur cap! He’s got a needle too—pulls out threads from the mattress. But he’s a god-fearing man for all that. Knows his prayers better than any priest. His gods are different, but he says our prayers. Yes, he prays alright. And he’s obedient too. Hey Timoshka, sing us a song!”

Timoshka broke off from his prayers, took hold of a stick and turned to Mick. “With the drum?” he asked. There was a touch of humour in his crude voice, as he passed from prayer to banter without any obvious effort.

“Of course, stupid!”, Mick replied.

Timoshka launched off into an endless song, beating time with his stick. Taken quite fast, the song had a dismal barbaric sound of its own. My companion and I tried to recall its simple theme afterwards, but it would not come to mind.

“There’s no end to that song of his”, Mick observed. “He’ll go on singing now till I tell him to stop. I forgot to tell him once, and on he went, singing to himself. The inspection party came round and the warden says to him: ‘what are you up to?’ ‘Mick told me to sing a song’, he says. He’s obedient alright! All the same he strangled three men with his own hands. They broke his legs in the madhouse, so he can’t walk. Starting to get up a bit now he is, but it’s hard work. He can knock out a good tune though!”

“You mean to say they break your legs in hospital?”

“Well it’s not a good place to be, I’m telling you. No need for it either. He’s obedient is the Ostyak. Talk sensibly and he listens. But they get worked up there in the madhouse. Doesn’t take much to do a fellow in. That one’ll go the same way soon”, Mick nodded rather maliciously at Yashka’s door. His voice had lost the kindly indulgent tones in which he spoke to the obedient Timoshka who strangled people with his own hands and flayed cats alive. Obviously in his eyes Yashka was a worse case than the Ostyak.

This strange character and his unique position roused my interest more and more. In time I began

to discover some system in his kicking. One day, after he had raised the roof, I noticed Mick looking round anxiously to see if anyone was coming. Then the old man spoke to Yashka sharply.

“What’s the matter with you? There’s nobody there”.

Yashka stopped at once. Obviously he was not just kicking at random, but intended the barrage for someone’s ears. I soon realised that kicking was his way of saluting all officials from the senior gaoler upwards. The higher the official, the louder his salute as a rule. During the night it was much quieter, as though Yashka was kicking in his sleep. I imagined he would wake up, give three or four kicks and then, his duty done, go back to sleep again. On one occasion, however, the noise broke out in the still of the night like cannon fire. It turned out next morning that the prisoners upstairs had been involved in a brawl that night which had brought the authorities on to the scene.

The kicking left its mark on Yashka. “His legs are all swollen up”, Mick told me, “but he goes on just the same”.

On our third day in prison we asked to be allowed out for exercise, and instructions were given for us to be released after roll-call when the other prisoners were locked in their cells for the night. I decided to use the time to get to know Yashka better.

II

The bell rang. "Stand by for inspection!"

Silence in our wing. Three or four corridors away a door slammed, and the noise gathered like the rumbling of a distant flood. The inspection party invaded our wing and Yashka set to work.

When the party had inspected our cells and gone upstairs to the cockloft, Mick opened our door. Mercury, the duty prisoner for our wing, who cleaned the cells, emptied the slop-pails and ran errands for the "privileged" prisoners, came in with the samovar. Mick asked us to behave "decently", and not go out until the inspection was over.

The party came downstairs again. Our door was not locked and we could distinctly hear Yashka banging away and shouting.

"Infidels!", he yelled as the party passed his door, "servants of Antichrist, why do you keep me here, why do you torment me?"

I remembered the plaque over his door. Could it be a mistake the thought flashed through my mind. Perhaps this man, locked and immured in that dreadful hole, that tomb, was not a lunatic at all, but capable of comprehending the full horror of his position?

"Why do they keep Yashka in such strict confinement?" I asked Mercury.

"He's a murderer, an escaped convict", Mick put in without hesitation.

"No, Mick", Mercury replied slowly. "That's just talk. Nobody knows", he went on, addressing me. "He won't tell us his name even. People say he was sent out here for civil disobedience. I don't know for certain whether he escaped or what."

"Doesn't it say over his door he's a lunatic?"

"He's just putting it on", Mick maintained in his abrupt manner.

"No—o—again you can't tell. Perhaps he's not a lunatic", said Mercury rather evasively. "Probably he really is kept in for civil disobedience and disrespect. If the police inspector or anyone comes, even the governor himself, he doesn't mince his words. Always the same: 'Infidels, servants of Anti-christ'. That's why it is. He used to be able to walk round the prison quite freely".

"But why does he kick?"

"Again it's—how can I put it?—it's a sort of accusation".

Mercury went out. We made tea and went for a stroll in the corridor. The footsteps of the retreating party were still audible in the distance. We could see Yashka's moustache, part of his beard and the tip of his nose behind his cell window. He stood stock-still as though waiting for something to happen.

Suddenly the door shook again under his furious blows.

"Why do you kick like that, Yashka. No one can hear you. There's nobody about you know", I said.

"Over there look", Yashka said solemnly, nodding his head in the direction of the corridor window through which I could see the last soldier in the party standing framed in the darkness against an

open doorway. Another moment and he was gone. Only then did Yashka deem it possible to stop and to turn his attention to me. He bent down to look at me closely through the window. I was still not able to see the whole of his face. His striking grey eyes were clouded over like the eyes of a very tired man. His forehead was high and would pucker up into deep furrows from time to time, whether in sorrow or in anger it was impossible to say. Evidently Yashka was tall and very strongly built. He was probably about fifty years old.

"Who are you?" he asked. "Where are they hounding you to?" I told him my name and destination.

"What's your name?" I asked.

"Jacob, it was . . . Jacob they called me".

"And your surname? Where were you born?"

Yashka looked at me hard with some suspicion, and after a moment's silence answered briefly: "I've forgotten".

Gradually we got talking. As a prisoner with special rights and in civilian clothes, I was rather a strange phenomenon in Yashka's eyes. But to me he appeared just an ordinary convict, speaking in a calm, restrained voice and generally very matter-of-fact.

"Disturbs you my kicking, eh? Never mind. You'll get used to it", he said with a laugh. "I'm quieter at night, though I beat a tattoo when the servant of Antichrist comes round with his little book".

"Tell me Jacob", I asked, "why do you kick?"

Yashka fixed his large eyes on me, and there was a

certain ritualistic awe in his voice as he replied: "I stand for God, for the great Tsar, for Christ's law, for the holy baptism, for my country and all its people". I was a little surprised as he seemed to notice.

"I'm denouncing the authorities", he explained, "the unrighteous authorities. That's why I kick."

"But what good does it do?"

"Good? It does good . . ."

"But what? How?"

"It does good", he repeated stubbornly. "Listen: I stand for God, the great Tsar . . ." and he went through the whole formula again.

"But why are you kept here?" I asked him later.

"Why? The infidels . . ." began Yashka, fidgeting about excitedly behind the door. "Why am I kept here? Not for any crime. I've done no wrong. And if I had, it's not for them to judge. Let God judge!"

"You're a murderer", said Mick who had been following our conversation closely. "It's no use putting on an act."

"It's not true, it's not true", said Yashka in an agitated voice. "You've made it up, you infidels! It's not true, don't believe them Vladimir, don't believe the servants of Antichrist. I've done no wrong. 'Deny your God, deny your great Tsar', they tell me, 'then we'll let you out'. But I can't. It's impossible. You know yourself—it's death to stray away from God and the true law: death to the soul at least, if not the body".

Just then a small figure in a grey overcoat with brass buttons came out of the dark corridor at right angles to ours. I recognised the senior gaoler. The

grey-headed prison rat was out after his prey. He stole along, the old man, flattening himself against the wall so that Yashka should not see him. He had a notebook and pencil in his hand, and it was his duty to note down the times of his nightly rounds. It was then that Yashka's subdued kicking was audible.

"Open the cockloft", the senior gaoler whispered to Mick as he slipped past Yashka's door. Mick slowly unbolted the door leading to the stairs to the cockloft. This housed a thieves' colony, and it was not called "cockloft" without good reason. The fact was that the prison was intended for barely half the number of actual inmates. It had therefore been necessary to resort to cunning, and the provincial architect had somehow contrived to adapt new ceilings to the high rooms, which reduced their height considerably and were used as a floor for the loft. A part of the long windows divided by this entresol was thus in the loft and gave it light. There is no need to say that this arrangement was far from satisfactory, and from a hygienic point of view the thieves' loft was quite impossible to live in.

"You're alright here", Mercury would say referring to our quarters. "Even a respectable educated man can go on living, just about. But God save you from that dark, damp, stinking thieves' den. It's sheer murder!"

To compensate a little for the lack of light and air, the prison warden allowed the thieves certain privileges. For example they were not locked in at night, since even the Siberian laws of hygiene made it impossible for foul-smelling slop-pails to be left

in the cells till morning. And so a member of the thieves' colony upstairs could suffocate in one cell for a start, and then go and suffocate in another for a change. However, the cockloft made up for certain inconveniences as accommodation by its more highly developed communal life. Noisy chatter and sometimes wild shrieks would come from there during the night. The warden would be summoned and perhaps a military escort as well, and the rampaging thieves would be caught at their gambling and carousing like sparrows after a fray, which little boys pick up.

Slowly Mick drew back the bolt, and the senior gaoler, having made an entry in his notebook, crept along to the stairs. "He's after their vodka", Mick whispered. "He'll catch them drinking and gambling."

But at the crucial moment, as the old prison vulture set foot on the stairs, Yashka, sensing the presence of one of the "infidels", began hammering on his door. The old man jumped like a scalded cat. I could imagine the painful effect on his strained nerves of that unexpected and shattering interlude. He hopped up and down like a trapped animal, hesitated, was in two minds whether to rush on or not, and finally turned back realising that the game was up and that the thieves would have had time to cover up their tracks.

"Lock the door", he mumbled to Mick. "Damn you Yashka, I'd mash you to pulp if I'd half a chance", he hissed, clenching his fists and pounding them together as though he imagined he was pounding Yashka in the process. But Yashka stood by his door, obviously pleased that the blow aimed quite

at random in the Lord's name had struck home so effectively.

"Don't you like it, you infidel?" he growled after him. "How long am I going to be kept here, you servants of Antichrist?"

"Just you wait", hissed the "infidel", and the meaning of that wait was clear enough. Yashka was entirely at the prison rat's mercy without an ally in the world, but for all that he could and did torment his captor unsparingly. I began to understand the strange relationship between Yashka in his cell and the "infidels" who kept him there. Once he was locked up they could ignore him they thought, and that would be the end of it. But by his relentless protests he had managed to harrow their nerves and force them to a painful awareness of his presence, and thus he had got the better of the foes who had secured him hand and foot. Physically subjected, he did not consider himself their prisoner as long as "the Lord was his strength" in the only struggle he could wage—with his feet. In that he saw his mission and his triumph.

"Always the same—kick, kick, kick. No sense in it, only hurts himself", said Mick as he locked the stairway door. "What's the point of it? They've locked him up, put him in the cooler, given him the straitjacket—but still he won't stop. You wait", he turned to Yashka, "They'll take you to the madhouse and you won't kick there for long! They'll give you a beating worse than they gave Timoshka".

"They can do what they like, I don't care. You can't frighten me", replied Yashka. "I stand for God and the great Tsar. For God, you servants of

Antichrist, d'you hear? Don't think because you've locked me up here that I'm your subject. I'll go on kicking, praise the Lord and Queen of Heaven. God is my strength. I'm no slave of Antichrist's".

"It's the straitjacket for you, you noisy beggar. We'll keep you tied up. That'll stop you kicking".

The autumn shadows creeping out from the corners of the old prison gathered in the corridors.

"It's time to pray", said Yashka. "Goodbye".

He walked away from the door and when I glanced in some time later he was at prayer. His window was covered with some old rags through which filtered sparsely the half light of evening. Yashka's form stood silhouetted, a black speck against the light. He was making the sign of the cross, jerking his body forward convulsively and straightening up again more gingerly. He was like a man possessed.

My companion and I walked up and down the darkening corridors. As we approached Timoshka's door we heard his regular, dirge-like chant. Wild moaning sounds and pestilential smells floated from the Jew's cell. Next door a hard labour victim, likewise billeted there owing to shortage of space, was rattling his chains as he took his usual stroll, while overhead the thieves were chuckling and making merry. There was silence in the other cells as sleep descended on them. Two vagrants billeted together were cooking something on a little stove. They were evidently fond of the "home fires". They spent all day searching for chips of wood and rubbish of all kinds which they picked up from the prison yards, spent their last coppers on groats and kindled a fire

in their stove in the evening when everyone had been locked in for the night. Sometimes at this hour I would go along to their cell and look in quietly so as not to disturb their peaceful enjoyment. One of them, a forbidding man in his forties, would be sitting directly opposite the stove, his knees clasped in his hands, keeping a careful eye on the fire and the little pot in which the groats were boiling. The other would be lying on his mattress by the stove with his face towards the fire and his chin resting in his hands. He was little more than a boy, with a pale prison-like complexion and large expressive eyes. The fire crackled and the water in the pot hissed and boiled, but silence reigned in the cell. They seemed to be afraid to interrupt the music of their improvised hearth. But when the fire had died down and the groats were ready they would take off the pot and share out the microscopic quantity of porridge which seemed to have a symbolic, almost a sacramental, significance for them rather than any food value.

The occupants of the end cell which served as an extension to the corridor were constantly changing. This cell was no different from the others except for its function and the fact that it had no door-pane. Wide slots were an adequate substitute however. Glancing through one of the slots I could see two men lying on the floor at opposite ends of the cell without even a mattress underneath them. One of them had wrapped his coat round his head and appeared to be asleep. The other was staring gloomily into space, his hands folded behind his head. A burned-out tallow candle stood beside him.

“Antip”, exclaimed the latter, suddenly sitting up on the floor with a start as though some agonising thought had crossed his mind. The other man did not stir.

“Hand it over Antip, you cur! D’you think I’m flush with money? That’s all I had, damn your eyes”.

Antip pretended to be asleep.

“You swine, you”, said the other, and sank back on to the hard floor. Then all of a sudden he sat up again with a malicious expression on his face.

“Listen here, Antip. Any more fooling and I’ll murder you! I don’t care if I swing myself, I’ll do you in first you swine”.

Antip was snoring deeply and contentedly as though asleep on a soft feather bed, not in a prison cell alongside a violent neighbour. But I had a feeling that underneath his coat he was taking the necessary precautions all the same.

“They’d a fight last night in the cockloft”, Mick explained to me. “The warden sent them both to the lock-up. Antip there stole some money or something from Fedor. Nicked a couple of roubles, so they say”.

“Fancy locking them up together. They’ll only go and fight again”.

“Not them”, Mick answered with a significant smile. “They know the warden doesn’t stand for that sort of thing. ‘Put them together’, he says, ‘and if you fight there you sons of bitches, I’ll give you the works. You know what that means’. They know alright . . . He’s got a little place called the cooler—least that’s the polite name for it. It was used last winter too, I can tell you. A day and night in there,

then straight to the hospital. Hang on there a day or two and that's that".

I had the opportunity of seeing this lock-up, or rather of not seeing it so much as feeling it. At the four corners of the yard were four old stone towers overgrown with moss and spittle-like slime. They stood in the inner angles of the square-shaped prison building and you entered them from the corridors. Once when walking along our corridor I noticed a door which evidently led into one of the towers, and Mercury told me it was the entrance to the old lock-up. The door was not locked and we went in.

It had been dark in the corridor, but it was darker still in that building. A faint ray of light filtered in from somewhere above and seeped through the chill damp of the cell. A couple of steps and I knocked against some debris. "This is where the boiler used to be", Mercury explained. "They got hot water there, and you can still feel the damp. It's bad! Worse, because there's no stove at all now". The foul, musty, slimy atmosphere of that tomb chilled me through and through. Obviously in winter it would be completely frozen up. So this is "the works", I thought.

As I made my bewildered way out, the prison rat was slinking along the corridors again to fetch the keys for the night, while Yashka was still proclaiming nothing daunted that he continued to stand for God and the great Tsar.

Yashka, I thought as I retired to my cell, you're a brave fellow indeed if you've seen "the works" and are not afraid.

III

"Why is Yashka's cell so dark and cold?" I once asked, having observed the sepulchral gloom inside and the draught blowing from the yard.

"He smashes the window frames", answered Mick. "Can't keep him quiet. And it's dark 'cos he hangs rags up outside the window—to keep the cold out. Breaks the glass and hangs up rags. Warmer that way he thinks. I ask you, isn't he a bit touched? . . . 'For God and the great Tsar!' . . . It's your own fault you've got no glass", and he shrugged his shoulders contemptuously.

I asked Yashka the same question.

"Don't you see?", he replied solemnly. "They want me to freeze to death, the infidels. That's why they won't put a frame in".

"What did you smash it for?"

"I didn't. The servants of Antichrist were making for me. They had the jacket with them. I could see they were up to no good. You know how it is—a man's afraid of death. I backed away—grabbed hold of the window frame. They tugged and out fell the frame. What could I do? I did wrong because I was afraid. Afraid of the jacket".

A few words about these straitjackets. The idea is a good one, some might even say humane. To prevent a lunatic or a violent case from using his hands to cause harm to himself or anybody else, he must not be allowed freedom of movement. Stout

leather sleeves are therefore put on his arms to pin them to his body. To hold them in position, the sleeves are bound by two stout thongs which go twice round the body. Ideally the purpose of the straitjacket is a preventive one and if Mick used it as a threat of punishment or revenge, it was merely another confirmation of the unhappy truth that in life no idea is proof against abuse.

It must be admitted however that such abuse is considerably facilitated by the nature of the strait-jacket which readily allows of many excesses. For example, the buckles which do up the thongs can be tightened just sufficiently to pin the arms to the ribs, or they can be tightened to excess and cause severe damage to the ribs. If one considers that the victim seldom or never wants to put the jacket on himself, and that force has therefore to be used, one can understand why Yashka thought of the operation as being tantamount to death itself.

IV

One day I gave the corridor orderly some money and asked him to buy Yashka anything he needed. The man misunderstood me and gave the money direct to Yashka. Later Yashka stopped me as I was walking along the corridor.

“Thanks Vladimir”, he said. “It was an act of Christian charity, the money. But I can’t take it. In the old days out in the world I was a sinner and

I took money then. But it's different now. There it is look on the floor. If you want to give alms give me bread. Bread's all the more welcome from a generous hand. The vandals keep me on half rations here. You know what that means—I'm nearly starved to death. Still, God hasn't quite forsaken me. Kind people keep me going. Someone let down a couple of barley cakes for me yesterday on the end of a rope. Thank God for true Christian men".

Although this indicated a certain sympathy from his fellows, nevertheless at the worst moments when Yashka's very soul trembled on the brink of imminent death and made him clutch frantically at the window frame and the cold prison bars, that soul must surely have been overwhelmed by the consciousness of a terrifying loneliness. Was Yashka mad? Of course not. True the Siberian psychiatrists gave a different answer and Yashka was soon destined to undergo the same primitive methods of treatment which Timoshka the Ostyak had undergone. None the less I have no doubt that Yashka was not a madman, but a zealot.

Yes, if in our generation there still are any uncompromising zealots, devoting their whole being to an idea whatever it may be, inexorable in their demands on themselves, not tasting the meat of idolatry but renouncing for ever the sinful world, then such a one was to have been found behind the locked doors of that solitary confinement cell for prisoners "awaiting trial".

"Have you any family?" I once asked Yashka.

"I had", he answered gruffly. "I had a family, a house and everything".

“And are your children still alive?”

“God knows, I don’t. He looks after them”.

“You must long for your people at home. Can they write to you?”

“No, I don’t”, he shook his head as though to drive out painful thoughts. “What I do long for most of all though is for them to hold out and not forsake the law”.

For some time he stood silent and grim. Then he continued thoughtfully: “Out in the world you can save your soul, and that’s the greatest thing of all. But it’s a struggle. The world gets on top of you. Times have changed now—live together and you die together, father and son, mother and daughter—there’s no saving your soul. Not that it’s easy here, all on your own. No, it isn’t easy. The devil tempts you—leads you astray. The vandals rack your body with cold and hunger. Deny God and the great Tsar they cry. Yes, the soul is sore distressed. The flesh is weak, even unto death”.

Nevertheless it would have been easier to lead a man like Mick astray from that road on which he had found lasting peace of mind, than to have compelled Yashka to turn aside from the thorny path where he encountered only sorrow. He seemed to be impervious to fear or flattery, threats or favours.

One fine but rather cold day in the late Siberian autumn Yashka added a new accusation to his usual list at inspection time.

“You’re freezing me to death here. Why don’t you put me in a new window, you servants of Anti-christ?”

Next day a new frame was put in. Yashka’s room

was warmer and brighter, but he went on kicking as hard as ever that evening. Such blind ingratitude was too much for His Excellency the Warden.

“You scoundrel, Yashka”, he said reproachfully as he stopped outside his door. “I’ve put in a new window for you and you’re back at your old tricks again.”

“Infidel!”, growled Yashka in return. “Are you trying to bribe me with your frame? Trying to buy my soul with it are you? You’re wasting your time. I’m not your subject yet. You put the frame in for your sake not mine. I stood up for God without a frame and I’ll stand up for Him with one”.

The door shook beneath a hail of short, sharp blows.

“Did you hear?”, Yashka said to me later with profound contempt. “Did you hear what the infidel was up to? ‘I’ve put you in a frame’, he says. ‘You give up your God and great Tsar in return!’—Then another of the vandals tried tempting me with buns! They took me with a party to Tyumen. The officer buys a couple of buns, gives them to me and says: ‘Here’s two buns’, he says, ‘for Christian charity. Only mind you’re obedient. Mind you behave yourself’. Just imagine! ‘I’ll take your alms’, I says, ‘in Christ’s name. Take them from the devil himself I would. Only I’m not your subject, you infidel’. You won’t buy me with flattery. Praise the Lord, the Queen of Heaven is my strength. Just watch!”

What was the “law” for whose sake Yashka endured his sufferings? Clearly he had a positive philosophy, the basis of which was “God and the great Tsar”. But it was a strange mixture of

mythology and realism. On the one hand non-existent atheists led by non-existent government ministers were conquering the world, capturing human souls, demanding the renunciation of God and the great Tsar. On the other hand there was undeniable suffering, very real suffering, undeniable persecution of the cause Yashka considered right, the expressed readiness to die, and—terrible thought—every likelihood of dying. Yashka foretold it on the basis of his fantastic theory. Mick confirmed it as the undoubted truth. “He’ll end up the same as Timoshka if not worse”.

In Yashka’s opinion the world was heading for disaster. There had been three “ages” already, though Yashka had only a hazy notion what they were.

“You see”, he said in reply to my question about these “ages”, “I read about them in the *Sbornik*, but I’ve probably forgotten them. Rome fell. That’s one. The second was—Byzantium I think. That’s two. Yes, and Moscow’s the third. Now there’s a fourth—worst of the lot. 1861¹ it began”.

“How do you mean?”

“How do I mean? Well, what do you call yourself now?”, Yashka asked to my surprise.

I had no idea, but Yashka answered for me. “You call yourself a “former” state peasant. Former, understand! That is you used to be one but you’re not now. That’s the sort of age it is. The *zemstvos*² have come, the civil authorities have taken the place of the state”.

¹ The date of the emancipation of the serfs.

² Local government bodies or county councils first instituted in 1864.

Since 1861 the world had been cleft in two: on the one side the state, on the other the zemstvo, the civil authorities. Yashka recognised the former but repudiated the latter without reservation. Over the former he raised the eight-pointed cross and identified it with the true law. The latter he called the kingdom of the coming Antichrist.

"So, Yashka. It's a harder life under the civil authorities, is it?"

"Harder! Life's impossible. In the old days you paid taxes to the Tsar. Now you've to pay taxes to the zemstvos as well—if you're their subject that is".

"And don't you pay the taxes?" I asked, beginning to guess the immediate cause of Yashka's imprisonment.

"The state ones. We pay in full to the great Tsar. But to the zemstvos we owe nothing, the infidels. They plague us and take away our freedom. Even take the crosses off our churches".

"But there are still crosses on the churches".

"Not proper ones. The proper ones have gone. And the sign of the cross—three fingers—that's not the proper one either. It's all their doing, their mark".

"Listen Jacob. How do you explain this? Surely the great Tsar still goes to church?"

"The great Tsar", replied Yashka in a tone admitting of no doubt, "still abides by the law of old. But the Polish tsar, the Finance Minister—they're on the new side".

¹ The "Old Believers", split off from the main body of Orthodoxy by the schism in the 17th century, used two instead of three fingers when making the sign of the cross.

It was becoming evident that the future belonged to the new. Yielding to pressure from that quarter the great Tsar had issued a proclamation stating: I hereby decree—let the servants of Antichrist seduce whom they may. Let them tax and own the souls of those in their power. But he who remains steadfast and abides in the true law, let no one dare take away his freedom.

The new order had gone from strength to strength. The “infidels” had disobeyed the proclamation and begun to usurp power by violence. Things were getting harder and harder. No quarter given. And no protection. The state and the eight-pointed cross were in eclipse. The state authorities were helpless. The people gave in because they could see no support. Proclamations yes, but what was the good? Civilians tried you now—in secret too.

Secret trials since 1861—the very time when publicity had first begun to be enjoyed! This was too much for me, and I tried to dispel Yashka’s fantastic notion by expounding the basis of the new system of public judicial procedure. Yashka listened quite attentively.

“Wait”, he broke in at last. “You think I wasn’t tried? I was tried alright! Tried by a jury though I’d done no wrong. I don’t recognise their sort of trial. All the same I was tried. The big wig says to me ‘not guilty’ he says; ‘Guards, release the prisoner. Acquitted by this court’. Well they’ll let me out now, I thought. And they did too—out here—the secret court did”.

I understood. The court had publicly acquitted Yashka, but the administrative authorities had exiled

him. Yashka supposed that the public sentence was a stratagem of Antichrist and that there was another sentence besides that pronounced in secret. "You see the cunning of it all". Of course Yashka thought everything deliberately designed—the law-court, the ministers, the governors, the prison warden, Mick—they were all in the plot to deliver his soul to Antichrist. Hence life was impossible in the outside world. There you perished, father, son and all. The bonds of social life were broken. A man must guard his soul alone, in isolation. Victory for the servants of Antichrist was virtually guaranteed. Yashka had left his family, left his household, left everything that went to enrich his life of toil on the land, and was now alone in the power of the infidels. "Why do they just torment me?" Yashka wondered. "I can't forsake the true law. No, never. I'll spit in their eye sooner. Take me and finish me off—only don't go on persecuting me". He was absolutely convinced that the only reason he had not been "finished off" before was that his soul would please Antichrist better alive.

But even his plight seemed preferable to what he thought was in store for those branded with the mark of Antichrist in the outside world. The new dispensation threatened universal and inevitable disaster.

"The longer it goes on, the worse it'll be. 'No good shall come, but only evil', the *Sbornik* says. The land will be bought up".

"Surely it's being bought up now", I remarked.

"That's true, it is", replied Yashka, unruffled. "And it's going to be worse. The man with twelve thousand will own land. The man with a couple

of thousand will die landless, believe me. You're still young. Later on you'll mark my words".

"Come Yashka, surely you don't think that Anti-christ is stronger than God? Surely God's truth can overcome falsehood?"

Yashka thought a bit. I noticed on his face the signs of acute mental effort. At length he came out with a definite answer.

"No, I don't", he said. "We work and we die. Yes", he repeated a minute later. "We work and we die. But you and me—we shan't see the truth".

V

"You don't recognise civil justice, Jacob. Do you recognise that of the state?" I tried on another occasion.

"Yes".

"Who are the state authorities in your opinion? The governor-general would you say?"

"The governor-general, yes. He's appointed by the great Tsar. He's alright".

"That means his judgement's alright?"

"He told them to release me long ago. And yet look".

"Wait. Let's suppose the governor-general were to try your case".

"What for? There's nothing to try me for".

"Just a moment! You say there's nothing, but

the civil authorities say there is something. Someone has to decide you know. You recognise the state authorities? Well then, don't you see, they've tried you and found you guilty".

"They can't have done. They're bound to be just".

"Well, think it out carefully. The civil authorities say to you—'alright, let the governor-general try your case'. He has the right to decide, hasn't he?"

"Well?" said Yashka waiting for the next step.

"You're bound to obey him, as a proper government authority?"

"Well?" said Yashka slowly, carefully avoiding an answer and obviously interested in the possibility of some new solution.

"Well, this is his decision: obey the new dispensation, Yashka, carry out your obligations to the zemstvo".

Yashka was put out.

"But look though" . . . He fumbled for a reply.

"Now answer me. Will you obey or not?"

"Er . . . well . . . I . . . no!" he snapped out at last. "I can't obey. I can't". And his face recorded his unyielding obstinacy.

"I've got a question to ask you, Vladimir", he said to me once. "What's your law? Is it the same as ours?"

In order to test Yashka's tolerance, I denied allegiance to his faith, and unfolded to this fanatic of the "old law", the principles of a teaching utterly

foreign to him. In expressions comprehensible to Yashka I expounded a code of practical morality on the basis of brotherhood and equality. Taking a rather unfair advantage of his ignorance of dogma and the scriptures, I took my stand on the saying: "By their deeds ye shall know them", and on appropriate texts from John, utterly refuting ritual and substituting "works"—that is, the practical endeavour to work out the formula of love. All this I passed off as my religion.

Yashka listened carefully, but to my surprise failed to notice the most vital point in my creed.

"We put it this way", he said to my astonishment. "All men are born of Adam".

I put the question more clearly and turned the weight of my criticism against the two-fingered sign of the cross.

"Have you read in the scriptures: 'Worship in spirit and in truth?' Well what are the fingers, spirit or flesh?"

Now Yashka understood.

"It says also," he began slowly, 'worship in soul and body'."

"Where?" I asked.

Yashka thought hard, but made no reply.

"Yes, yours is good too", he said thoughtfully. "Everyone reasons differently of course".

And heaving a sigh, he added with a strange expression: "And no two madmen are alike".

VI

We had been in prison a fortnight when, early one evening, long before inspection time, the prisoners were herded into their cells. The corridors were deserted, and over our ward there hung that tense silence fraught with expectation, which had already taught us to sense in advance the approach of senior officers. A door banged in the distance; rifles clattered; scores of footsteps were audible.

Nearer and nearer they came until the party burst into our corridor. The footsteps came to an abrupt halt outside Yashka's door.

The bolts rattled, the door opened. For a few seconds there was a deathly silence. Then the old deputy warden said: "Come out Jacob, you're free".

"Liar", came back Yashka's gruff voice. "Liar, cheat, infidel! This isn't the time to release me".

The escort broke into the cell. There was the sound of a struggle; something tumbled heavily to the ground.

"Help, Lord!", cried Yashka in a muffled voice, like a man suffocating. "They've come for my soul! . . . I'm dying!", he cried louder and louder. His voice, one moment stifled the next loud and clear, betrayed acute suffering and the fear of death.

"Vladimir, Vladimir", he yelled, suddenly remem-

bering there was a man next door, even though it was a prison door, who was perhaps capable of understanding his plight.

“Vladimir, Vladimir, Vladimir!”

Some fantasy began to obsess me. I banged loudly on my door.

“What is it now?” said the deputy warden. “Who’s that knocking?”

“The politicals, your Excellency”, said Mick.

“Ask them what they want. No wait, I’ll ask them myself”.

A grey-haired old man in cap and uniform came up to our door and stared at me with short-sighted listless eyes.

“What do you want?”

The question embarrassed me. What *did* I want? Stark reality confronted me in the person of that old man and I did not know what to say to it. I was locked in a cell myself, behind barred doors. How was I to intercede for Yashka? What grounds had I?

“What’s going on there?” I asked. “What are you doing to Yashka?”

“What’s it to do with you, may I ask? It’s none of your business. We’ve had orders from the warden—send No. 5 to the asylum. Well we are. It doesn’t affect you, does it?”

VII

There was complete silence in our corridor as Yashka was carried out bound, put into a cart and taken away.

Would he abjure "God and the great Tsar?" Would the Siberian psychiatrists abjure their primitive methods of treatment? There was no need to ask. My mind was full of painful thoughts. The deathly silence of the cell and corridors oppressed me.

Old Mick slowly locked Yashka's cell, stood in front of it for a moment, nodded his head pensively and went back to his favourite seat. The old prison rat walked briskly up and down the corridor, glancing with satisfaction at the empty cell from which the sound of Yashka's deafening kicks was heard no longer. He muttered to himself and smiled evilly.

That evening the inspection party toured the cells as usual. All was quiet.

"We've got rid of our noisy friend", said His Excellency to the escort officer. "They took him away to the asylum to-day".

Suddenly the thud of blows resounded along the corridor. His Excellency shuddered, the prison rat dropped his pencil and pad, the officer turned nervously aside. The whole party seemed to stop dead in its tracks.

"Why d'you keep me here, why do you torment me, infidels?", rang out the reedy voice of Timoshka

the Ostyak. And the general tension broke up in laughter.

It was a completely unexpected prank. The Ostyak's reedy voice mimicked Yashka's lusty shouts so comically, and the whole business presented such a sorry and ludicrous parody that His Excellency simply roared with laughter. The whole party followed suit. The old deputy blinked his short-sighted eyes as he laughed, the stout officer's fat body shook as he guffawed, the prison rat sniggered, Mick smiled and his long moustaches bristled, the soldiers laughed into their beards as they stood at attention with their rifles to their sides.

Next day we were on our way again,

Killer



I

NIGHT was falling as I drove down in the post chaise to the ferry. A stiff breeze rippled the surface of the wide river and splashed the waves abruptly against the steep bank. Having heard our bell in the distance, the ferrymen had stopped the raft and waited for us. They locked the wheels, lowered the coach on board, cast off the tie-ropes. The waves smote the wooden sides of the raft, the steersman spun the wheel round and the bank began to recede slowly from us, as though repelled by the impact of the water.

There were two other vehicles on the raft besides ours. In one I could make out an elderly, respectable-

looking man, evidently a merchant by profession. In the other were three young men who probably belonged to the lower middle classes. The merchant remained in his carriage, sheltering behind his collar from the fresh autumn breeze and paying not the slightest attention to his chance companions. They on the other hand were in a lively, sociable mood. One of them with a squint and a slit nostril started up on the concertina every now and again and drawled out some song in a coarse voice; but the wind soon cut short the raucous sounds and bore them swirling down the broad and muddy river. The second man had a bottle and glass in his hand and was regaling my driver with vodka. Only the third, who was a strong, healthy, handsome man of about thirty, lay at full stretch on the cart with his arms folded under his head, pensively watching the grey clouds scudding across the sky.

For two days these now familiar figures had kept turning up on my journey from the provincial town of N. I was on urgent business, travelling post haste as we say, but both the merchant on his fat mare harnessed to a two-wheeled gig, and the young men on their skinny nags, had managed to keep up with me. After each stop I made for rest or business I would overtake them again on some road or ferry.

“Who are those people?”, I asked my driver when he came back.

“Kostya and his pals”, he answered guardedly.

“Who?” I repeated, not knowing the name.

The driver seemed reluctant to give me any further information in view of the fact that our conversation could be overhead. He glanced at the young men

and then quickly pointed down the river with his whip. I looked in the same direction. Ripple after ripple spread like dark weals across the broad surface of the water. The waves were dark and turbid, and large, gull-like birds circled restlessly above, swooping down to the river every now and then and soaring up again with hungry, plaintive cries.

“Cormorants!”, explained my driver when the raft reached the bank and our troika whisked us on our way again. “And them there young fellows, they’re cormorants too”, he went on. “No home. No job. Sold their bit of land last year. Now they’re on the prowl like wolves. Make life impossible”.

“What, robbers are they?”

“Yes and worse. Cutting travellers’ luggage off and rifling tea from the baggage train—that’s their game. If the driver’s going back empty and there’s nothing doing, they steal his horse if they’ve half a chance. You know how it is—you yawn a bit, drop off, and there they are. Kostya back there had his nose slit by a driver, no joking! He’s a proper savage, Kostya, don’t you forget it. Hasn’t a real pal in the world since the carters killed his mate”.

“Caught red-handed, was he?”

“He was, no mistake. Right out of luck he was. The carters had a rare old time with him”.

My driver laughed into his beard.

“First they cut off his fingers. Then they set him alight, and to finish up with they pulled out his guts on the end of a stick and left him. He’s dead alright, the dog!”

“You seem to know them. Why are they standing you vodka?”

"You'll get to know them too", said the driver sullenly. "Stood them a drink myself more than once, 'cos you never know when. . . . Remember, Kostya's not travelling for his health. He wouldn't flog his horses so much without some reason. He's got wind of something, the devil, that's certain. There's that merchant there too", he added thoughtfully after a moment's silence. "Are they after him now? Shouldn't think it's likely though. . . . He's got a new chap with him as well. Chap I haven't seen before".

"The one lying in the cart?"

"That's him. A downy bird, I'll bet. Healthy looking devil! But I'll tell you what, sir", he began, turning to me. "You take care of yourself. Don't travel at night. It'd be a bad look out if they got on your track".

"Why, do you know me?", I asked.

The driver turned round again and tugged at the reins.

"I don't know", he replied evasively. "They say the Kudinovs' bailiff is on his way from the province. Nothing to do with me".

Evidently I was known here. I had been acting for the Kudinovs, a merchant family, in a case against the treasury which I had recently won. My patrons were famous in those parts, and indeed throughout Western Siberia, and the trial had caused a sensation. Having received a very large sum from the provincial exchequer I was now hurrying to N. to pay in the money by a certain date. There was little time left, and as the postal service to N. was infrequent, I was taking the money with me. I had to travel day and night, branching off the main roads in places on to

more direct country lanes to save time. In view of this, the reputation that had gone before me, great enough to stir up a flock of hungry "cormorants", was not at all comforting.

I looked back. In spite of the gathering darkness I could see a galloping troika, and the merchant's gig bowling along some distance behind it.

II

There were no horses at the posting station where I arrived that night.

"Damn it all, Ivan Semenich old chap!" said the post-stage master, a stout, good-natured man with whom I had managed to establish friendly relations during my frequent journeys, "damn it all, take my advice, don't travel at night. Forget all about them and their business. Your life's worth more than other people's money. There's nothing but rumours about that case of yours and the shekels for upwards of fifty miles around. I shouldn't wonder if the cormorants aren't already astir. Stay the night!"

I knew his advice was sound of course, but I couldn't take it.

"I must go. Get me some private horses, will you. Time's getting on".

"You're a stubborn fellow! Alright then, I'll get you a driver you can trust. He'll take you to B. But stay the night there whatever you do. You'll have to go through Devil's Ravine, you know. God-forsaken

place it is. Shady folk about what's more. Wait till morning anyway".

In a couple of hours time I was back on board the coach listening to my friend's parting advice. The good horses galloped off without delay and the driver, stimulated by the promise of vodka, drove them at full speed the whole way. We reached B. in no time.

After passing a few huts strung out along a wood, we stopped at the gates of a large and evidently prosperous house. A very respectable looking old man with a long grey beard met us with a lantern. Lifting it above his head he scanned my face with his short-sighted eyes and said in a quiet elderly voice: "Ah, Ivan Semenich! Just as the lads said. 'The Kudinovs' bailiff's on his way from town. Have the horses ready, old man'. 'What are you worried about?' I says. 'He may intend staying. It's night time'".

"What lads?" my driver interrupted.

"Don't ask me. The cormorants most likely! Shady customers they looked. I expect they're from town, though exactly who they are I couldn't say. You can't get to know them all. . . . But you'll be staying the night, sir?"

"No. Get me some horses right away will you," I said, none too pleased at the reputation which had preceded me.

The old man thought a bit.

"Go inside. Don't stand there. I haven't any horses I'm afraid. Sent the lad to town with a load the day before yesterday. Better stay hadn't you?"

This new setback discouraged me considerably. Meanwhile the night had thickened into the sort of

impenetrable darkness only possible in a rainy autumn in Siberia. The sky was completely hidden by heavy clouds. Looking up, it was just possible to make out the heavy shapeless masses moving in the gloom; but down below pitch darkness reigned. Two paces away and nothing was visible. Fine rain spattered lightly on the trees. The dense taiga seemed to rustle and whisper mysteriously.

Nevertheless I had to go on. I went into the hut and asked the master of the house to send to one of his neighbours for horses. The old man shook his grey head. "Sir, it's a sin to hurry off like this. And what a night it is indeed. Like the darkness that covered Egypt, Lord forgive us!"

My driver came into the room, and he and the master began to confer. Once again they asked me to stay. But I insisted. The peasants muttered something, ran through various names, argued with one another.

"Alright!", said the driver, apparently agreeing with reluctance. "You'll have your horses. I'll drive over to the farm right away."

The driver began to put his things on in the other room. The master kept repeating something in his trembling senile voice. I started to doze off by the stove.

"Don't forget, lad", I could hear the master saying outside, "tell Killer to put a move on. He's impatient, I'm afraid".

Almost at once I heard the sound of a horse galloping out of the yard. The old man's last remark disturbed my sleep. I sat facing the fire brooding. A dark night, a strange place, strange people and not

altogether comprehensible talk, and now to crown it all that strange, ominous word. My nerves were on edge.

About an hour and a half later I heard the sound of a bell just outside the window. A troika stopped at the door. I pulled myself together and went out.

The sky had cleared a little. The clouds were racing by, as though they too had a destination to reach. The rain had stopped but for occasional large drops falling from somewhere out in the darkness, jettisoned at random from the scudding clouds. The taiga was murmuring. The wind rose as dawn came on.

The master escorted me out with a lantern, thanks to which I was able to distinguish my driver. He was a peasant of exceptional height, sturdy, broad-shouldered, a veritable giant. His face was somehow placidly sullen, stamped with that peculiar mark left as a rule by an intensely experienced emotion or a deep-seated and tragic memory. His eyes were motionless and sad.

To tell the truth I felt for a moment like sending this gloomy giant on his way, and staying the night in that bright warm room. But it was only for a moment. I fingered my revolver and got into the carriage. The driver fastened down the cover and clambered on to the box.

"Listen, Killer," the old man said in parting. "Keep your eyes skinned. I don't have to tell you. . . ."

"I know", answered the driver and we plunged into the darkness of that stormy night. Two or three fires flickered in outlying huts. Smoke curled up in the grey air over against the dark forest, and sparks

flew out and seemed to melt into the gloom. Eventually the last habitation was left behind. Only the black taiga and the dark night lay about us.

The horses kept up a steady pace and carried me rapidly towards the fateful ravine. Soon the spur of a hill loomed up against the sky which for all its sombreness had grown a little lighter. I could hear the murmur of a forest up above, and down below the splash of a river in the darkness. A solitary black crag pointed to the sky. It was the Devil's Finger.

The road hugged the river as it climbed up into the mountains. Close to the Devil's Finger it branched off a little way from the spur of the hill and was joined by a track running in from a gulley. This was the most dangerous place of all, renowned for the midnight deeds of many a Siberian adventurer. The narrow stony road did not allow of fast travel, while the bushes would screen a flank attack until the last moment. We drove on to the gulley. The Devil's Finger towered up to meet us, looming higher and higher in the gloom. The clouds sailed over it and seemed to brush against its summit.

The horses plodded on. The shaft horse cautiously stamped its hooves and kept its eyes fixed on the road. The outrunners pressed against the shaft and snorted in fear. The bell shook unsteadily and its quiet note floated sadly away over the river, to be drowned in the soft air.

Suddenly the horses halted. The bell shuddered violently and stopped. I stood up. A black shape was moving among the dark bushes by the roadside. My driver had just stopped the horses in time: we had

escaped a flank attack but our position was critical. To turn back or to branch off was impossible. I was about to fire at random when suddenly I checked myself. The driver's huge frame as he stood on the box, screened the road and bushes from sight. Killer stood up, slowly handed me the reins and jumped to the ground.

"Hold tight. Don't fire!" His voice was calm but commanding. I never thought of disobeying. My suspicions vanished completely. I seized the reins while the surly giant strode over to the bushes. The horses seemed to understand and quietly followed their master without having to be told.

The noise of the wheels over the stony road prevented me from hearing what went on in the bushes. Killer stopped as we reached the place where we had first noticed movements. All was quiet: only the leaves rustled and the twigs crackled over towards the spur of the hill. People were evidently picking their way through there, and the leader was wasting no time.

"That coward Kostya's first to take to his heels", said the driver, listening to the noise. "Look though, one of them's still here!"

As he spoke a tall figure stepped out of a bush very near to us and dived rather shamefacedly into the taiga after the others. We could plainly hear the sound of four pairs of retreating feet. Killer walked back to the horses as calm as ever, straightened the harness, tinkled the bell on the shaft-bow and got up on to his seat.

Immediately there was a flash from a rock below Devil's Finger. A shot rang out, filling the empty

silence of the night. Something smacked against the wicker framework of the trap and ricocheted off into the bushes. Killer started to run for the rock like a wild animal in a rage, but pulled himself up almost at once.

“Listen, Kostya”, he shouted in an agitated voice “Quit fooling I tell you. If you’ve hurt that innocent beast of mine you won’t get away with it however smart you are. Don’t fire, mister”, he added gruffly to me.

“Look out yourself, Killer”, came back a low voice from the rock, evidently not Kostya’s “and keep your nose out of other people’s business”.

A few minutes later Devil’s Finger ravine was behind us and we were back on the main road.

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III

We travelled for a couple of miles in deep silence. I was thinking over what had happened, while the driver just fingered the reins, coaxing on or holding in his horses. At last I broke the silence.

“Well thanks, friend! I’d have looked sorry but for you very likely”.

“It was nothing”, he answered.

“Nothing, eh? Those fellows looked a bad lot to me.”

“They’re a bad lot alright”.

“Do you know them?”

"I know that brute Kostya. You can't help knowing him. I've seen the merchant before too. But the one who stayed behind, he's new. See he trusted Kostya and stood his ground. But Kostya's no hero, brother. He's always the first to turn and run for it. That other one's brave though".

He was silent for a moment.

"He's never been here before, never," he went on quietly with a shake of the head. "Kostya's picked him up somewhere. He'll not stop till the crows are feeding off me."

"Why are they so afraid of you?"

"Afraid? . . . Yes, they are afraid. I killed one of them. . . ."

He brought the horses to a stop and turned round in his seat.

"Look", he said. "See back there, the ravine, look! It was in that ravine I killed him".

The coach stood on the brow of the hill. The road ran westward. Behind us stood silhouetted against the rising dawn a mass of rock clothed with forest, and the huge boulder pointing upwards like a raised finger. It seemed very near, the ravine. We felt the early morning breeze fan us on the hill top. Our frozen horses stamped their hooves and snorted. The shaft-horse broke out of line, but the driver reined in the troika in an instant, leaned out of his seat and stared hard in the direction of the ravine. Then suddenly he turned back, gathered up the reins, stood up on the box and gave a shout. The horses responded at once, picked up their hooves, and away we went careering downhill at a furious gallop. The horses pinned back their ears and flew as if in mortal

dread, while every now and again the driver stood up and waved his right arm without a word. The troika seemed to sense these movements without seeing them. The ground flew away beneath the wheels; trees and bushes raced to meet us and dropped behind us, as though mown down by a furious whirlwind.

We slowed down again on the flat. The horses were steaming. The shaft horse panted heavily; the outrunners whinnied and twitched their ears. But gradually they quietened down, and the driver loosened the reins and coaxed them gently.

"Easy now, my beauties! Don't be afraid. The horse is a dumb creature," he said to me, "but he understands all the same. Once they get to the top there's no holding them in. They can smell mischief."

"I don't know", I said. "Maybe. But this time at least you urged them on yourself."

"Urged them on did I? Well maybe I did. But if you only knew what was in my heart, master. . . ."

"What? Tell me".

He lowered his eyes.

"Alright", he said, after a moment's silence. "I'll tell you. Gee up my beauties, don't be afraid!"

The horses pounded along the soft road at a fast, even trot.

"You see. . . . It was a long time ago. . . . Not awfully long ago though, but a lot's happened since. My life's changed completely, that's why it seems so long. I was hard done to then by those above me. God didn't spare me either. Took my young wife and little boy in the same hour. I hadn't any parents. All alone I was in the world—no friends, no relatives.

Even the priest—he took my last possessions to pay for the funeral. Well, then I began to think hard. I thought and thought, and in the end my faith foundered. My old faith foundered and I couldn't find a new one. Of course I was ignorant. I couldn't read or write much, and I didn't trust my wits at all. The thought of it all caused me sorrow, such terrible sorrow, that I felt I'd gladly be rid of the world. I left my hut and what household things I had—threw up everything. All I took was a sheepskin coat, trousers and a pair of boots. I cut myself a stick in the taiga and off I went”.

“Where to?”

“Nowhere particular. I'd stay in a place, work for my bread, plough the farmer's field and move on somewhere else for harvest. A day here, a week there, a month some other place; and all the time watching how people lived, how they prayed, what they believed. I was searching for righteous men.”

“Did you find any?”

“How can I put it? There's all sorts of people of course, and all of them have their own troubles it's true. But in our country people have almost forgotten God. You know as well as me—life wouldn't be like this if we followed God's law. It's everyone for himself so long as his belly's full. And what's more the criminals that go about in chains aren't the real criminals, are they?”

“Maybe not. Well?”

“Well, I began to pine more and more out in the world. I couldn't see any sense in it. I wandered about like a man lost in a forest. I've got a bit of sense now of course. But then I was completely crazy. I

took it into my head to get arrested, see what I mean”.

“How?”

“It was simple. Said I was a vagrant, and they put me in prison. A sort of cross I took upon myself”.

“And did it make you any easier?”

“Not likely. It was stupid of course. You haven’t been to prison and you probably don’t know, but I found out alright it’s no monastery. The big trouble is the people there aren’t any use, they’ve no work to do. They shuffle about from corner to corner thinking up all sorts of nastiness. When it comes to swearing and bravado, there’s no one to beat them. But as for thinking about their souls, thinking about God, it’s the rarest thing imaginable. They even laugh at the idea. They’re a hardened lot. I saw in my folly I’d come to the wrong place. I told them who I was and asked them to let me out. But they wouldn’t. Question after question they asked. How’d I had the nerve to take matters in my own hands like that? In the end they wore me down. I don’t know what’d have happened to me, but for a strange piece of fortune. I suffered enough as a result of it, but I suppose it’d have been even worse if it hadn’t happened.

“There was a rumour going the rounds of the prison: Gammy-arm was on his way back in. I listened to the talk. Some said it was true, others argued with them, but I must say it didn’t worry me either way at the time. People were brought in every day. Then some prisoners arrived from town and said: ‘Quite right. He’s on his way now under close escort. He’ll be in gaol tonight alright.’ All the old

lags flocked out into the yard out of curiosity. I took a stroll too, not from curiosity but just the usual amble round the yard out of boredom. Once I started walking and thinking I forgot all about Gammy-arm. But suddenly the gates opened and an old man was led in. A small, thin old man he was, with a loose grey beard. As he walked, he tottered unsteadily on his legs. One arm hung down uselessly. But still he had an escort of five, with fixed bayonets too. When I saw it I was staggered. God, I thought, what are they doing. How can they treat a man like as if he were a tiger? It'd have been different if he'd been a great strapping fellow, but no, a miserable old man with one foot in the grave!

“I felt terribly sorry for him. The more I looked, the more my heart ached. They took the old man into the office, and got the blacksmith to forge shackles for his hands and feet. The old man took hold of the iron chains, crossed himself in the old fashion and put them on his feet himself. ‘Go on’, he said to the blacksmith. Then he signed the cross over the handcuffs and put them on too. ‘Make me worthy, Lord’, he said, ‘for my repentance sake!’”.

The driver stopped and lowered his head as though living through in his memory the scene he had narrated. Then with a shake of his head he went on again :

“He put a spell on me, honestly he did; took me by the heart strings. It was amazing! Afterwards I got to know him properly. He was a real devil, God forgive me, Old Nick himself. To think I could have imagined him a saint! Even now when I think of his

prayer, I don't believe it. It can't have been the same man.

"I wasn't the only one either. A hush fell on the old lags too. They simply stared in silence. Those who'd made fun at first didn't say a word. Some even crossed themselves. You wouldn't believe it, brother.

"Well, he had me in his clutches alright. I used to brood in those days like a man in a trance. I thought to myself, the old man's a real saint, just like there used to be in the old days. I hadn't any friends then, didn't even talk to anyone. I didn't go to see anyone and nobody came to see me. Sometimes I heard them talking, but for all the impression they made on me they might have been a lot of flies buzzing. All my thoughts I kept to myself; I never asked if they were right or wrong. In the end I decided to make a real effort to get to the old man's cell. The opportunity came, I slipped the guard a coin and he let me out—afterwards they used to let me out for nothing. I went to his cell window and looked in: there was the old man pacing up and down, dragging his chains after him and muttering to himself the whole time. When he saw me he turned round and came to the door.

"'What do you want?'

"'Nothing', I said. 'Just came to pay a visit. It's dull all on your own'.

"'I'm not on my own here' he answered. 'God's with me, and it's not dull with God. Still, I'm glad to see an honest man all the same'.

"I stood facing him like a proper fool. He looked at me in surprise and nodded his head.

“‘Get away from the window lad, I want to take a good look at you’, he said.

“I stood back a bit. He put his eye to the key-hole, stared hard and said:

“‘Tell me, what sort of fellow are you?’

“‘There’s nothing to tell’, I replied. ‘A lost soul, that’s all’.

“‘Can you be trusted? Would you let me down?’

“‘I’ve never let anyone down yet, and you won’t be the first. I’ll do anything you say faithfully’.

“He thought a bit and then continued: ‘I need to send a man out of here tonight. Will you go?’

“‘How can I get out?’ I said.

“‘I’ll show you’, he said.

“And show me he did and I walked out of that prison just like I would my own house. I found the man he sent me to and gave him the password. Back again early next morning. I must say when I got near the prison at daybreak my heart started beating faster. What’s the point in sticking my head into a noose, I thought. Far better clear off! The prison was out of town you see. The highroad lay ahead. The dew sparkled on the grass by the roadside, the corn stood ripe, a forest murmured gently across a stream. Freedom! But look back, and there was the prison watching me like a moping owl. It was still night time, and things were quiet. The thought of the dawn and a new daily round in that place was too awful. I couldn’t bear it. I longed to escape along the road to freedom and the open spaces.

“And then I remembered the old man. I can’t let him down, I thought. I stretched out on the grass, buried my face in the ground, lay a while, then got

up and turned back towards the prison. I never looked behind. As I got nearer I raised my eyes and there in the tower where the solitaries were, the old man was sitting watching me from behind the bars.

“Next day I went up to his cell, and told him how I’d carried out all his instructions. He brightened up. ‘Thank you, child’ he said. ‘You’ve done me a real service. I’ll never forget it. But I expect you long for freedom, don’t you?’ he asked me later, with a laugh.

“‘I do, desperately!’

“‘To be sure. But what brought you here, what crime?’

“‘No crime’, I said. ‘Just folly, that’s all’.

“He nodded his head at that. ‘It grieves me to look at you, lad. Here has God given you such strength, and you no youngster either, and yet you know nothing at all but your own foolishness. You’re sitting here now—what’s the sense in it? There’s sin in the world, brother, but there’s salvation too’.

“‘Sin in plenty’, I answered.

“‘And isn’t there plenty here? Yes, and no sense in it either. You’ve done wrong here yourself haven’t you? But have you repented?’ ‘I’m ashamed’, I said. ‘Ashamed! What about, you don’t know. That’s not true repentance. True repentance is sweet. Listen to what I tell you and remember: only God is without sin; man is sinful by nature and is saved by repentance. But repentance comes after sin, and sin dwells in the world. No sin, no repentance; no repentance, no salvation. You understand?’

“I can’t say I really did understand his words then. I just heard them and felt they were right.

Besides, I had been thinking, what sort of life was I leading? I wasn't like other people, I wasn't really living in the world at all. I might as well have been a blade of grass in the fields or a tree in the taiga. No use to myself or anyone else.

“‘That's right’, I said. ‘Even though you can't live in the world without sin, at least you can live, instead of loafing about like this. Only I don't know how to live. And besides they won't let me out of prison’.

“‘That's my business’, the old man said. ‘I've prayed for you. I've been given the power to rescue your soul from its dungeon. If you promise to obey me I'll show you the way of repentance’.

“‘I do’, I said.

“‘You'll take your oath on it?’

“‘I'll take my oath’.

“And I took my oath, because I was absolutely in his power then. I'd have gone through fire and water for him. I trusted that man. One prisoner did say to me: ‘Don't get too thick with Gammy-arm. He's no saint on earth, believe me. Some merchant put a bullet through his arm in a hold-up!’ I took no notice, particularly as he was tipsy when he spoke, and I hated drunkards. I turned my back on him and he flared up. ‘You'll regret it, you fool’, he said. And he was right too, I must say, drunkard or not.

“Things got better for Gammy-arm before long. He was moved from his solitary to a communal cell with the rest of us. Only like me he still kept to himself. When the prisoners started cracking jokes, he'd hardly say a word. He'd just stare, and the most

hardened character there would wilt. He had an evil look.

“A little while longer and he was completely free. I was walking round the yard once in summer when I saw the magistrate go into the office and Gammy-arm after him. Inside half an hour they came out into the porch, the old chap wearing his own clothes like a free man and looking pleased. The magistrate was laughing too. Fancy that, I thought—bringing a fellow here and treating him so rough when he’s done nothing wrong at all. I felt sad and lonely. I’d be all on my own again. Then he looked round the yard, caught sight of me and beckoned me over. I walked across, took off my cap and bowed to the magistrate.

“‘Can’t you try this lad soon, your honour’, he said. ‘He’s done nothing wrong’.

“‘What’s your name?’ the magistrate asked.

“‘Fedor Silin’, I said.

“‘Ah, yes, I remember. Well, it could be done. But there’s no need for it. People aren’t tried for stupidity. Let him out, give him a clip across the ear to make sure he doesn’t get up to his old tricks again, that’s all. Yes, come to think of it, I’ve had papers about him for some time. I’ll let him out next week without fail’.

“‘Good, that’s fine’, said Gammy-arm. He called me to one side and went on: ‘As soon as you’re free lad, go to Kildeev farm, and ask for the master, Ivan Zakharov. I’ll tell him about you, son. Don’t forget your oath’.

“Off they went. A week later they let me out. I left the prison and made straight for these very parts.

I found Ivan Zakharov and told him Gammy-arm had sent me. 'I know', he said. 'The old man told me about you. I'll take you on for the time as a labourer, then we'll see'.

"'Where's Gammy-arm?' I asked.

"'He's away', he said. 'Still on business. He'll be back soon I expect'.

"And so I started life on the farm, a labourer of sorts though I didn't know any real job. A small family it was—the master himself, a grown-up son, another labourer and me—that's all. And the women-folk of course. Gammy-arm dropped in too occasionally. They were strict people, Old Believers, who kept the law. No tobacco, no vodka. Kuzma the labourer was a half-wit, shaggy and black as a nigger. If he heard the sound of a bell he'd run for the bushes and hide. It was the old man he feared most of all. He'd only to catch sight of him in the distance and he'd be off into the taiga, always to the same hide-out. The master would call and call. No answer. Then Gammy-arm would go and speak to him and out he'd come like a lamb and carry on with his job.

"He didn't visit the farm often, Gammy-arm, and he hardly ever spoke to me. He used to talk to the master and he'd watch me working; but if you went up to him, he'd have no time for you. 'Wait son', he'd say, 'I'm going over to the farm now, we'll talk then. I'm busy now'.

"I was lonely. The master didn't work me hard, the food was good and I never heard a bad word. They didn't often let me take passengers. Either the master went, or else his son and the labourer, usually

at night. It was worse when I had no work to do; what worried me most was whether I'd ever find a job.

"It was about five weeks I suppose after I'd left prison. One evening I was riding back from the mill when I saw a crowd of people in our hut. I unharnessed the horse and was just going into the porch when the master came out and stopped me. 'Don't go in', he said. 'Wait a bit, and I'll call you. Don't go in, d'you hear?'

"I wonder what's going on, I thought. I turned back and went to the hayloft. I lay down on the hay, but I couldn't sleep. I remembered I'd left my axe near the stream. I'll go and get it, I thought. They should have gone now. I hope nobody's taken it. So I walked past the window and peeped into the hut. It was full of people, the hut, and the magistrate was sitting at the table with vodka and sandwiches and pen and paper in front of him—to cut a long story short, there was a trial going on. On a bench at the side sat Gammy-arm. God! You could have knocked me down with a feather. His hair hung over his forehead, his hands were tied behind his back and his eyes were like coals of fire. I can't tell you how terrible he looked then.

"I lurched away from the window. It was autumn. The night was dark and starry. I don't think I shall ever forget that night. The river was gently lapping, the taiga murmuring, and me dreaming it seemed. I sat down on the grassy bank, trembling all over. God!

"I don't know how long I sat there before I heard someone coming along the path out of the taiga. He was wearing a white jacket and a peaked cap and

was swinging a stick. The registrar it was—lived a couple of miles away. He crossed over the bridge and went straight up to the hut. I couldn't restrain myself. I followed him and looked through the window. What would happen next?

“He went inside, took off his cap and looked round. He didn't seem to know himself why he'd been sent for. Then he walked up to the table, calling to Gammy-arm as he passed, ‘Hello, Ivan Alekseevich!’ The old man simply looked through him, while the master tugged at his sleeve and whispered something. The registrar looked surprised. He went up to the magistrate who was pretty drunk already and who stared at him through bleary eyes as though half asleep. They greeted one another and then the magistrate asked:

“‘Do you know this man?’ pointing to Gammy-arm.

“The registrar looked at him and exchanged glances with the master.

“‘No, I've never seen him before’, he said.

“That's queer, I thought. The magistrate knows him well enough himself.

“Then he asked:

“‘He's not Ivan Alekseev, of these parts known as Gammy-arm, is he?’

“‘No, that's not him’, replied the registrar.

“The magistrate picked up his pen, wrote something on the paper and began to read it out. I listened at the window, dumbfounded. The paper made out that old Ivan Alekseev wasn't Ivan Alekseev at all; that his neighbours and even the registrar didn't recognise him as the same and that he was called Ivan Ivanov and had a passport to

prove it. Amazing it was! All the people there had a hand in it, and not one would acknowledge him. The fact was they were all picked men. All the witnesses were in Ivan Zakharov's debt, his slaves as good as.

"When it was all over the witnesses were dismissed. The magistrate had already told them to untie Gammy-arm. Ivan Zakharov got out some money and gave it the magistrate who counted it and put it in his pocket. 'Now see you clear off for three months or so, old fellow', he said. 'If you don't, you'll only have yourself to blame. Now, get my horses!'

"I walked back to the hay-loft, thinking someone would come for the horses. I didn't want to be seen near the window. I lay on the straw, awake, but in a dream. I couldn't collect my thoughts. I listened—there went the magistrate. A jangle of bells and he was away. Everyone in the house had gone to bed, the fires were out. I was about to drop off when I heard the ting-a-ling-a-ling of a bell again. The night was still as still, the sound was far away. Gradually it came nearer: someone was driving our way from across the river. A little while later and they heard the bell inside the house too. The fires were built up again. A troika had driven into the yard with some passengers. I knew the driver. We used to go backwards and forwards to each other's places.

"Maybe they'll stay the night, I thought. In any case, they didn't send me out much at night time; usually it was the master or else his son and the labourer. So I began to drop off again when I heard

Gammy-arm and the master talking in a low voice down below.

“‘Well, what about it?’ said the old man. ‘Where’s Kuzma, though?’

“‘That’s just it’, the master answered. ‘Ivan and the magistrate have gone, and Kuzma beat it as soon as he saw the people. He’s not in the bushes either. He’s mad that lad. A screw loose alright’.

“‘What about Fedor?’ the old man asked, meaning me.

“‘I just stopped him going in the house on his way back from the mill last night’.

“‘Good, he must have gone off to bed. He didn’t see anything, did he?’

“‘No, I don’t think so. He went straight to the hay-loft’.

“‘Fine. We’ll let him in on the job today then’.

“‘Will it be alright?’ said Zakharov.

“‘Yes. He’s a simple lad, but he’s tremendously strong. And he’s obedient. I’ve got him wrapped round my little finger. I tell you I’m going away for six months now, and the lad’s got to get used to the job. That can’t be managed without me’.

“‘Still I don’t trust him’, said Zakharov. ‘There’s something about him I can’t make out, although he looks a fool’.

“‘Come now’, the old man replied. ‘I know him. A simple lad. We need the likes of him. We’ll have to get rid of Kuzma somehow. I’m afraid he’ll mess things up’.

“They started calling: ‘Fedor, hey Fedor!’ I hadn’t the guts to answer. I kept quiet. The old man climbed up into the hay-loft and groped round

for me. 'Get up, Fedor!' he said ever so gently. 'Have you been asleep?' 'Yes', I said. 'Well get up, sonny', he said, 'and harness the horses; you've some passengers to take. Remember your oath?' 'Yes' I said. My teeth were chattering and I was shivering with cold. 'Maybe your time has come', he said. 'Listen to what I tell you. And meanwhile get the harness on quick. The passengers are in a hurry'.

"I dragged out the coach from under the cartshed, put the collar on the shaft-horse and started to fix the harness, but my heart was thumping furiously. And all the time I thought was it a dream? My head was in a whirl and I couldn't think. I noticed Gammy-arm was saddling his horse too—obedient as a pet dog it was. He put the saddle on with one hand, mounted the horse, spoke to it softly, and off he rode out of the yard. I finished harnessing the shaft-horse and went out of the gate to look. There he was, trotting away into the taiga. Although the moon wasn't up yet, you could still see a little way. He disappeared into the taiga, and I felt easier inside.

"I drove the horses up to the door. The passengers invited me in, a young lady with three children, tiny tots all of them. The eldest was a boy of four, the youngest a girl of no more than two. Poor woman, how did you come to be travelling alone in these parts without your husband I wondered. She was a quiet, friendly lady. Gave me a seat and a drink of tea. Any trouble in these parts, she asked. I said I hadn't heard of any, but I thought to myself, it's easy to see you're afraid, my dear. And good reason too, poor soul. Lots of luggage with her, travelling

in style, and with children too. A mother's heart can sense the future. Seems she wasn't travelling from choice either.

"Well, we got in and set off. There were still a couple of hours to dawn. We had gone pretty nearly a mile along the road when the outrunners shied. Hello, what's the trouble, I thought. I reined in the horses and looked round. There was Kuzma crawling out of the bushes on to the road. He stood up by the roadside and looked at me, shaking his shaggy locks and laughing to himself. You fiend, you! My inside turned over and I saw the lady was scared out of her wits. The children were asleep but she couldn't sleep, she was in anguish. Tears were in her eyes. 'I'm afraid', she wept, 'afraid of you all'. 'Christ be with you, lady', I said, 'I'm not going to kill you. Why didn't you stay the night?'

"'It was even worse there', she said. 'The last driver said we should reach a village by nightfall, but instead he took us to a lonely farm right in the heart of the taiga. The old man there—he had an evil look in his eyes'.

"God, what can I do with her, I thought. She's suffering, poor thing.

"'What'll you do now', I said to her, 'turn back or go on?'

"I paced about, not knowing how to comfort her, and that grieved me. The ravine was not far off. We had to go down a track to it, past the "stone". She saw I was embarrassed on her account and started to laugh.

"'Get in', she said, 'and drive on. I shan't turn back. It's worse there. I'd rather go on with you,

because you've a kind face'. Nowadays people are afraid of me, friend. "Killer" they call me. But in those days I was as innocent as a child. I hadn't the mark of Cain upon me then.

"I joked with her too, and got up on the box. 'Let's talk', the lady said. She asked me about myself and told me she was going to join her husband. A rich man he was, an exile. 'Have you been living long with those people there?' she asked. 'Do you work for them?'

"'He took me on recently, the master', I told her.

"'What sort of people are they?'

"'They're alright', I said, 'as far as I know. They're strict—they don't drink vodka, don't smoke tobacco'.

"'Never mind about that', she said. 'That's not important'.

"'How should they live then?' I asked. I saw she was intelligent although she was a woman. Perhaps she'd have something sensible to say to me.

"'Can you read and write?' she asked.

"'I've learned a little'.

"'What is the greatest commandment in the Gospel?' she said.

"'The greatest commandment is love'.

"'True. And what's more it says that greater love hath no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends! Thereupon hangs all the law. But you need intelligence as well', she said. 'That is, you need to weigh up what's important and what isn't. Ritual and tobacco—that's just outward show'.

"'You're right', I replied. 'But a little strictness doesn't hurt and keeps a man mindful'.

“And so we chatted and travelled slowly on. We came to a stream on the edge of the taiga. There was a ford there. The stream was shallow and narrow—one push on the raft and you were across it. No need for a ferryman. The kiddies woke up, opened their eyes and looked. It was still night. The forest was murmuring, the stars were in the sky, the moon was just climbing up before the dawn. The children were thrilled—how could they understand!

“But as soon as we were in the taiga, friend, a chill ran through my heart. I thought I saw someone riding along the path ahead. I couldn’t see clearly, but it looked like Gammy-arm’s grey horse and I thought I heard the clatter of hooves. My heart sank. What was going to happen? Why had the old man come here? He’d already reminded me about my oath. It didn’t look good. I thought hard. I used to like the old man, but since that evening I’d been afraid of him; whenever I thought of his eyes, a shiver ran down my spine.

“I stopped talking. I couldn’t think at all, couldn’t hear a sound. The lady would say a word or two. I didn’t answer. Then she stopped too. Just sat there.

“The road was dark and narrow. The taiga was black and menacing. And my soul was black too, blacker than the night. I sat there in a trance. The horses knew the way themselves, I didn’t have to drive. Nearer and nearer we came—there was the “stone”. The grey horse stood in the road with the old man astride it, his eyes, God knows, like coals. The reins slipped from my hands. The horses stopped of their own accord in front of the grey.

‘Fedor’, the old man said, ‘Get down’. I got down from the box obediently, and he dismounted too. He stood his grey horse across the road in front of the troika. My horses didn’t stir an inch. I stood there spellbound. He came up to me, said something, took me by the hand and led me to the trap. I looked and saw an axe in my hand!

“I followed him, and murderer though he was, I could find no words to argue, no strength to resist. ‘Sin’, he said, ‘and you’ll know the sweetness of repentance’. That’s all I remember. We went up to the trap. He stood aside. ‘Now’, he said. ‘Start with the woman, on the head!’ I looked into the trap. God! The lady nestled there like a wounded dove, sheltering the kiddies with her hands and looking at me with her large eyes. My heart turned over. The kiddies were awake too, peeping like little birds. I wondered if they understood or not?

“That look seemed to shake me out of my trance. I turned my eyes away, lifted the axe. Terrified I was. My heart welled up. I looked at the old man. He shuddered. He understood. I looked again: his green eyes were swimming. I raised my arm. Crash! The old man didn’t as much as cry out. He slumped down at my feet and I turned him over—dead. I was no longer a man, God forgive me, but a beast”.

He drew a deep breath.

“What happened then?” I asked, seeing him silent and pensive.

“After that?—I came to my senses and saw Ivan Zakharov galloping towards us with a rifle in his hand. Up he galloped and I went for him. He’d

have been lying by the old man's side, only luckily he guessed what had happened. One look at me and he turned his horse and smote it across the flank with the butt of his rifle. The horse cried out like a man in pain, and soared up like a bird.

"I'd completely recovered now. Without more ado I got up on the box and whipped the horses. They wouldn't budge. There was the grey horse still standing across the road. I'd forgotten all about it. You could see it was well-trained, damn it! I crossed myself. There was nothing else for it, I'd have to kill the poor beast. There it stood just twitching its ears. I tugged at the reins, but it was stubborn. Get out of the trap lady, I said. The horses might bolt in alarm seeing that other one right in front of them. She got out, obedient as a child. The children got down too and clung to their mother. They were terrified by that dark and lonely place and my goings on besides.

"I got the troika out of the way, picked up the axe again and made for the grey. 'Get out of the road or I'll kill you!' It cocked one ear. I won't, it seemed to say. Then I saw red and my hair simply bristled up under my cap. I swung with all my might and landed across its forehead. It gave a whimper and slumped down with its legs sprawled out. I took hold of its legs, dragged it across to its master and laid them together by the roadside. Now lie there!

"'Get in', I said to the lady. She got the two younger children settled down, but the eldest one she couldn't manage. 'Help me', she said. The little fellow reached out his hand to me. I wanted to take

it, but I suddenly realised. 'Take the child away', I said. 'I'm all over blood. It's not right to touch the youngster'.

"They managed to get in somehow. I tugged at the reins, but the horses only snorted and wouldn't move. What could I do now? 'Put the youngster on the box', I said. She did so, holding him in her arms. I gave the reins a flick, and this time we went tearing away just like you saw now. Blood makes them run.

"Next morning I took the lady to the village police-station. I made my confession. 'Arrest me', I said. 'I've killed a man'. The lady told them all that had happened. 'He saved my life', she said. They tied me up. She was in tears, poor woman. 'Why are you doing that?' she asked. 'He did right, he saved my children from those bandits'. When she saw nobody took any notice of her she threw herself at me and tried to untie me herself. But I stopped her. 'Don't', I said. 'It's not your business. Leave it to men and to God. God and just men will decide if I was guilty or not'.

"'But what could you be guilty of?' she said.

"'Pride', I answered. 'It was pride that made me join those bandits of my own free will. I cut myself off from the world, acted on my own advice, listened to nobody. It was listening to my own advice that made a murderer of me'.

"She obeyed me and left. When she was ready to go she came to say goodbye, and kissed me. 'Poor soul!' she said. She made the children kiss me too. 'Don't defile the youngsters', I said. 'I'm a murderer'. I was really afraid the kiddies would

shrink away from me instinctively, sinner that I was. But no, she carried the young ones in her arms, while the eldest one toddled over by himself. When the little chap hung his arms round my neck I started to cry, I couldn't help it. The tears streamed down. She'd a kind soul, that lady. Perhaps for the sake of her kind soul the Lord will forgive me my sin.

“‘If there is any justice in the world’, she said, ‘we shall find it for you. I shall never forget you!’ Nor did she. You know how the law works with us—one long delay. I'd have been in prison till now if she and her husband hadn't rescued me with the help of some papers.”

“So they put you in prison then?”

“Yes, they kept me there a fair time. Money was the real reason. The lady sent me 500 roubles and they both wrote me a letter. When the money arrived things started to move. The magistrate came and called me to the office. ‘I'm dealing with your case’, he says. ‘How much is it worth to be acquitted?’

“So it's money you're after, your honour, I thought. Try me, I'm not asking for mercy. Just show me your law, then I'll knuckle under. But no, it was money he wanted.

“‘You won't get anything out of me’, I said. ‘Try me according to the law I'm bound by’.

“He laughed. ‘You're a fool, I can see’, he said. ‘The law can interpret your case in two ways. While the law's biding it's time, I'm in charge. I can do what I like with you’.

“‘So that's how it is, is it?’

“‘That's it’, he says. ‘You're a fool. Now listen

here. You were protecting the woman and children, weren't you?

“‘Supposing I was?’

“‘Alright. That may go down in your favour, you think? Quite possibly, since it was a good deed. Well, that's one way of looking at it’.

“‘And the other?’ I said.

“‘The other? Just take a look at yourself, what a great big fellow you are. Up against you is an old man—helpless as a child. If he was making a nuisance of himself you should have tied his hands behind his back and packed him off to the police in the proper way. But you—you knock him cold without so much as a by your leave. They'll call that taking the law into your own hands, because that's no way to go on. You understand?’

“‘I understand’, I said. ‘There's no justice here. If you'd told me all this without thinking of your own pocket I'd have knuckled under. But not you! You'll get nothing out of me’.

“Then he lost his temper. ‘Alright my pretty one’, he said. ‘You can kick your heels in prison. It'll be a long time before your trial comes round’.

“‘You needn't threaten me’, I said.

“And there he left me to rot, but the lady never gave up till she found a way. One day a paper came that knocked the magistrate off his balance. He summoned me to the office, bawled his head off and in the end he let me out the very same day. So I got off without a trial. But now I don't know . . . People say in time we'll get fair trials, and that's what I'm waiting for—to see what the verdict'll be, if God ever grants me a trial by jury”.

“Tell me, what became of Ivan Zakharov?”

“Ivan Zakharov vanished. He’d had an understanding with the old man. Zakharov was to follow close behind me, and if I wouldn’t agree to the murder, he was to shoot me on the spot. But God willed otherwise. By the time Zakharov galloped up, the deed was already done. He was scared. People said afterwards that he went straight back to the farm and started digging his money up out of the ground—dug it up then disappeared into the taiga without a word. At dawn the farm was ablaze. Whether he managed to do it somehow, or whether Kuzma started the fire going, nobody knows. It was ablaze at dawn, and by evening only the embers were left. The whole bandits’ nest went up in smoke. And now the womenfolk are roaming the face of the earth, and the son’s doing hard labour. There’s nothing to ransom him with these days.

“Whoa, my beauties! Here we are, thank the Lord. See look, there’s God’s sun just coming up.”

IV

About a month passed. My business completed I was travelling back post to my provincial town when one mid-day I arrived at the station of N. The fat post-stage master was standing in the doorway, puffing at a cigar.

“Is it a horse you want?” he asked, before I even had a chance to say hello.

“Yes”.

"There aren't any".

"Come now, Vasily Ivanovich. I can see some".

Sure enough a troika was standing with collar and harness on under the cart-shed. Vasily Ivanovich laughed.

"No, honestly there aren't any", he went on seriously. "I don't suppose you're in a hurry now. Stay here for a bit".

"But what's the reason? You're not expecting the governor, are you?"

"The governor!" laughed Vasily Ivanovich. "God knows where he is. No, much smaller fry, but I'm very keen to humour him all the same. Don't be offended, I'm fond of you too. But I can see you're not pressed for time, and the interests of justice, humanity, and I might almost say the salvation of mankind are at stake".

"What have you to do with justice? What's been going on here?"

"Stay and I'll tell you. But don't stand there. Come into my shack".

I agreed, and followed Vasily Ivanovich into his "shack" where his wife, a plump and remarkably good-natured lady, was waiting for us at the tea table.

"Yes, you were asking about justice", continued Vasily Ivanovich. "Have you heard the name Proskurov?"

"No, I haven't".

"I should think not" interrupted Matrena Ivanovna. "He's a mischief maker like my own man, and writes in the papers too".

“No, that’s not fair”, Vasily Ivanovich replied warmly. “Proskurov’s a trustworthy fellow, my dear, and well in with the powers that be. You ought to light a candle to my saint in honour of your husband’s acquaintance with such people. What do you think about Proskurov? You don’t think they’d appoint a dunderhead to investigate matters of the first importance do you?”

“What are you getting at?” I put in. “Investigate what matters of the first importance?”

“I told you so”, perked up Matrena Ivanovna. “It’s all nonsense. Do you think I’m a nincompoop or something? Important officials aren’t like that”.

“Look you’ve got Matrena Ivanovna ruffled”, the postmaster shook his head reproachfully. “And all to no purpose. Of course we don’t need that sort of post really, but if there’s someone filling it with particular credit, then so much the better”.

“I don’t understand you at all”, I said.

“Fancy now. You don’t understand, yet you get an innocent woman all worked up! Well, you’ve heard we have a company, a sort of joint-stock company, which lords it over the highroads and the dark nights? You’ve heard that, surely?”

“Yes, of course”.

“Well, it’s a company of all sorts and sizes. They work on a big scale, and their slogan is—you shield me, I’ll shield you. They don’t mind a bit of publicity either. At least every one knows perfectly well about the existence of the company, and even its members—everyone that is except His Excellency the Governor of course. But after one particularly brilliant escapade recently, even he had a brainwave.

They'll have to be "liquidated", he thinks. Nothing new about that I suppose: the company had liquidated itself in the past, and all had been well. But this time it was no ordinary brainwave. He was really so angry that he appointed his special duties man, Proskurov, with the widest powers to investigate not only incidents which had already taken place, but also any likely to take place in future if it was suspected they might have any connection with the others".

"What's surprising about that?"

"Talk about babes and sucklings . . . The surprising thing is they appointed an honest and energetic man! He's been three months liquidating already. What a fuss he's caused, God help us. He's worn out a score of horses alone".

"That doesn't help anyone, least of all you".

"Oh, it's not Proskurov's doing. He's a careful rider. It's the zemstvo police chasing him on their own horses. Competition you know. They try to get to the scene of the crime first—for the good of the service of course. But they don't often succeed. Proskurov's a real Le Coq. Once it's true, they did manage to snatch a morsel from right under his nose. The poor man was so cut up, he quite forgot himself in his official report. 'By the exertions of the zemstvo authorities', he wrote, 'all measures were taken to ensure the successful concealment of the crime'. Ha, ha, ha!"

"There you are, I told you so, a mischief maker", said Matrena Ivanovna. "Birds of a feather, both of you".

"No, he's no mischief maker", replied Vasily

Ivanovich. "No! though he did slip up once as the most careful of men can do. He saw afterwards he'd blundered. When they took him up about it the poor fellow had to blame it on a slip of the pen. 'In future', they told him, 'such slips of the pen must be avoided on pain of retirement through ill health'. The chump! Ha, ha, ha!"

"And where do you come in?" I asked.

Vasily Ivanovich put on an expression of mock solemnity.

"Ah, you see, I help. We've a real conspiracy here, you ask Matrena Ivanovna. Covert mutual aid, you know. While he's liquidating I hold horses in constant readiness for him. Take today: there's been a murder somewhere down the road, and his man's galloped off to tell him. That means he'll soon be here himself. My horses are already in the shafts, and I've asked the other stage-posts to be prepared. So you see, even in the modest capacity of post-stage master a man can perform services of no small worth. Yes, sir!"

The jolly postmaster could not keep up his serious tone, and he burst out laughing again before his peroration was done.

"Wait", I said to him. "You're laughing. But seriously speaking, do you believe in this liquidating mission yourself, or are you just an onlooker?"

Vasily Ivanovich took a deep puff at his cigar in silence. "Do you know", he said quite seriously, "I've never asked myself that question. Wait, let me think. No, it's the devil's own mission! He'll come a cropper before long, no doubt about that.

But I tell you, he's a very interesting type. Let me illustrate what I mean. It's clear that I don't really believe in the success of his cause and sometimes he seems to me ludicrous in the extreme, yet I help him, and I suppose Matrena Ivanovna is right—I'm getting on the wrong side of the 'real' authorities. Why's that? And it's not just me either. He's got his men everywhere, his sympathisers. That's his strong point of course. Only—it's strange nobody believes in his success. You heard what Matrena Ivanovna said: 'real officials aren't like that'. That's public opinion. All the same, while this lad plunges on, holding the banner high as the papers say, every man with an ounce of courage or simply without any personal interest does his best to remove a stone or two from the lad's path in case he should get hurt. Of course, it doesn't help".

"Why not, if the people are sympathetic and take a personal interest in the matter?"

"The sympathy's not really whole-hearted, that's why. Maybe you'll see for yourself what the lad's like. He blunders about without any tact, and doesn't care if he comes a cropper. The spectator looks on and shakes his head: 'they'll trip you up lad, as soon as look at you'. He feels kind of sorry. 'Hold on', he says, 'I'll clear the way for you, but you'll come a cropper later, as sure as eggs'. But he goes on, it makes no odds. Do you understand what sympathy means if you don't believe in the success of a cause? No, we need a real boss here, as cunning as a serpent, who knows all the twists and turns, can show magnanimity where necessary, and where necessary not scruple at a bribe—what's the

use of a boss without that! Then you might get confidence: 'this fellow'll do the trick!' Only then, damn it, there wouldn't be any sympathy, because the whole business would be explained as a clash of "ruling interests". Can't you imagine it! Hey-ho, what a country this is! Let's have a cup of tea instead".

Vasily Ivanovich broke off abruptly and swung round on his chair.

"Pour out the tea, Matrena dear", he said fondly to his wife who had been following her husband's talk throughout with great interest. "But what about a little nip first of all, eh?"

Vasily Ivanovich was another of those exceptionally interesting types which, it seems, one only meets in Siberia. At least only in Siberia will you find such a philosopher employed as a post-stage master. If he had been an exile, there would have been nothing surprising about it. There are plenty of people there toppled down by fortune's wheel from some considerable eminence and flung into places remote, who start to clamber up again step by step, giving to those lowly spheres in the process manners, education and culture beyond their wont. But unlike them Vasily Ivanovich was descending the scale, slowly but surely, on account of his free thinking. He responded to this with the true philosopher's composure. Having since his early days imbibed under those academic influences not uncommon in that land of exiles, the tastes and inclinations of an intelligent man, he had valued them all his life regardless of external comforts. Moreover the spirit of the artist was implanted in him. When Vasily

Ivanovich was in good form, you could listen to him to the exclusion of all thought about travel or urgent business. He had a fund of anecdotes, stories, sketches. He conjured up before your eyes a whole panorama of purely local specimens of that unique country forgotten by the reforms: all those magistrates, hungry, greedy, slippery customers; well-fed policemen, beginning to feel contented with life; mining inspectors living in the lap of luxury; advisers, senior advisers, civil servants with a variety of assignments. And over all this world as familiar to Vasily Ivanovich as the back of his hand reigned the local gods in benevolent majesty, with their ostentatious Pompadour bluster and their childishly naïve ignorance of the country, the field of vision of a Petersburg departmental official and the power of a mighty potentate. All these stories of Vasily Ivanovich were imbued with that inner feeling which a true artist puts into the depicting of a subject which interests him. And for Vasily Ivanovich the land which he painted in such frequently unattractive colours was a subject of profound interest. An intelligent man in the true sense of the word, he was fully entitled to apply to himself the poet's words—"I love my native land, but with a strange, strange love".

And love it he did, although this ill-appraised love of his had led to his gradual "degradation" as he termed it. When, after one of the shindies caused by his itch to denounce, he was offered a respectable post in Russia, he replied after a little thought: "No, thank you very much, but I can't. I can't, sir. What should I do there? It's a foreign country. And besides, I'd have nobody to swear at there".

“By the way”, Vasily Ivanovich said to me as we were smoking our cigars after tea and continuing our conversation, “you haven’t told me yet what happened to you that time in the ravine”.

I related everything already known to the reader. Vasily Ivanovich sat thoughtfully surveying the butt of his cigar.

“Yes”, he said, “strange people”.

“You know them?”

“How shall I put it? I’ve met them and talked to them and drunk tea with them as I have with you. But know them—well, no. I wouldn’t say that. Magistrates or policemen I can see through, perhaps because they’re kindred spirits, but these people I can’t understand. I’m sure of one thing though. Silin will meet with a bad end. They’ll get him sooner or later”.

“Why do you think so?”

“It’s bound to happen. Your’s isn’t the first affair. In all similar cases when no other driver’s willing, that young fellow is approached and he never refuses. And notice—he never carries any weapon. True he’s a formidable personality. Ever since he killed Gammy-arm he’s borne a strange charm, and it seems as though he’s come under its spell himself. But it’s only an illusion. People round these parts are already saying Killer’s not bullet-proof, though it’ll take a lucky bullet to get him. Evidently the persistence with which that chap Constantine shoots at him must mean he’s well stocked with lucky bullets”.

V

In the midst of our conversation Vasily Ivanovich pricked up his sharp ears.

“Just a moment”, he said, “that sounds like a bell. Must be Proskurov”.

At the mention of that name, Vasily Ivanovich’s bantering mood returned. He darted across to the window.

“Yes it is . Here comes our “liquidator”. What a sight, look! Ha, ha, ha! He always rides like that. Not a second to lose!”

I walked over to the window. The sound of a bell got rapidly nearer, but at first I could only see a cloud of dust apparently rolling out of the forest and scudding along the road towards the police-station. But the road which ran along the foot of a hill made a sharp turn off towards the post-stage and there we could see the riders very close below us.

A troika was careering along with a light gig in tow. Gravel and fine powdered dust spattered up from under the hooves of the excited horses, but still the driver leaned out of his seat and drove them on vociferously. Behind the driver was a man in a cockaded service cap and civilian top coat. Although the gig jolted and bounced along the bumpy road in the most merciless fashion, the gentleman with the cockade took not the slightest notice. He stood leaning across the driver’s seat and appeared to be scrutinising the horses’ every movement, making sure

that none of them should lag behind. From time to time he indicated to the driver which horse he thought needed whipping, and sometimes he even took hold of the whip and used it himself in an assiduous if not very dexterous manner. Only seldom was he diverted from this all absorbing occupation in order to glance at his watch.

As the troika raced uphill Vasily Ivanovich chortled to himself like a madman. But when the bell which had been ringing desperately outside the front porch suddenly stopped, he was back on the couch, smoking his cigar as if nothing had happened.

For a few seconds all one could hear from outside was the panting of the weary horses. Then our door flew open and the newcomer burst into the room. He was a man of about 35, not very tall, with a disproportionately large head. His broad face with its somewhat prominent cheekbones, straight eyebrows, slightly turned up nose and finely drawn lips was almost square in shape and radiated an energy all of its own. His large grey eyes stared right in front of him. Generally speaking it was the seriousness of Proskurov's face which struck one at first glance, but after a few moments this impression was somewhat modified. The neat sideboards in the civil service manner encasing as it were the smoothly shaven cheeks, the beard parted under the chin and a certain strange quickness of movement added to the first impression a touch of the comic, confirmed by the medley of contrasts in that original figure.

On entering the room Proskurov stopped for a moment, ran his eye quickly round and catching sight of Vasily Ivanovich made for him without further ado.

"Mister postmaster! Vasily Ivanovich. Horses, there's a good chap! Horses quick, for God's sake!"

Vasily Ivanovich preserved a coldly diplomatic mien as he lounged on the couch.

"Can't be done, sir. You're not supposed to have the post horses, and the zemstvo ones are needed for the magistrate. He'll be here soon".

At first Proskurov looked dumbfounded: then he suddenly flared up.

"What do you mean? I'm here first. No, excuse me, sir. In the first place you're mistaken about the post-horses; I have one ordered in case of emergency. And besides, on legal grounds . . ."

But Vasily Ivanovich was laughing.

"Damn you and your jokes, I've no time to waste", said Proskurov in vexation, obviously having been caught in the same trap before. "Hurry up for God's sake, I've got a job on".

"I know, murder".

"How do you know?" asked Proskurov anxiously.

"How do you know!" mimicked the postmaster. Why the magistrate's there already. I heard it from him".

"Lying again". Proskurov brightened up. "Those people haven't even caught wind of it yet, while we've already got the murderer, or more exactly that is, the suspect, in our hands. This little case is going to cause quite a stir. I'll shake them all up, just you see!"

"Alright, only watch you don't get shaken up yourself".

Suddenly Proskurov started at the sound of bells outside.

“Vasily Ivanovich”, he began in an ingratiating sort of tone, “they’re putting the harness on, I can hear them. It is for me isn’t it?”

Whereupon he seized the postmaster’s arm and looked anxiously in my direction.

“Yes, it’s for you, it’s for you. Take it easy. What’s your business over there anyway?”

“Murder, old chap! Murder again. Some murder too! Clear evidence of the work of a gang we know. I’ve got all the clues there. If I’m not mistaken there’ll be several wings to be clipped. Get a move on for God’s sake!”

“In a moment. But where did it happen?”

“In that damned ravine again. It should be blown up that place. A driver it was”.

“Not a mail robbery, was it?”

“No, he was a free lance”.

“Killer?”, I exclaimed, struck by a sudden conjecture. Proskurov turned round and searched my face with his large eyes.

“That’s right, that’s what the dead man was called. But may I ask why it interests you so much?”

“Grill him, give him a good grilling”, mumbled Vasily Ivanovich with a lively twinkle in his eye.

“I met him once”.

“So—o!” drawled Vasily Ivanovich. “You met each other. Was there any feud or rivalry between you, were you expecting any legacy from the deceased?”

“You and your jokes. What an intolerable man you are!” Proskurov drew aside in annoyance and turned to me.

“Excuse me sir, I hadn’t envisaged embroiling you

in this affair, but you understand, in the interests of, er . . .”

“Justice and the law”, put in the incorrigible post-master.

“To put it briefly”, continued Proskurov, giving Vasily Ivanovich a withering look, “I meant to say that a regard for the interests of justice is binding on every citizen, as it were. And if you can communicate any information appertaining to the matter, then, you understand—in short, it’s your duty to do so”.

A vague thought flashed through my mind.

“I don’t know to what extent the information I can supply can help clarify the matter”, I replied. “But I should be glad if it were to prove useful”.

“Excellent! Such willingness does you credit, sir. May I ask with whom I have the pleasure?”

I introduced myself.

“Afanasy Ivanovich Proskurov”, he returned. “You have just declared your willingness to further justice. In order not to do things by halves, will you agree sir, to . . . er . . . to accompany me at once?”

Vasily Ivanovich chortled.

“Well this is a fine how-do-you-do, I can tell you. Do you intend to arrest him or what?”

Proskurov seized my arm quickly and with some confusion.

“Please don’t think that”, he began. “There are no grounds whatsoever”.

I hastened to assure him that nothing of the sort had entered my head.

“And of course Vasily Ivanovich is joking too”, I added.

“I’m glad you understand me. My time is valuable. It’s only two stages you know altogether. You can tell me what you know on the way. I haven’t a secretary, incidentally”.

I had no reason to refuse.

“On the contrary”, I said to Proskurov, “I wanted to ask you to take me with you myself, since the case is extremely interesting to me personally”.

Killer, with his stern features, the marks of suffering on his wrinkled brow, the pensive look in his eyes rose before me as real as life. I remembered his gloomy prophecy—“He’ll not stop till the crows are feeding off me”. My heart shrank. Even now the crows were circling over his lustreless eyes in the dark ravine which had already cast its ominous shadow over his virtuous life.

“I say there”, cried Vasily Ivanovich suddenly, as he stared out of the window. “Afanasy Ivanovich, can you tell me who that is riding along the edge of the forest?”

Proskurov took one look out of the window and flew to the door.

“For God’s sake hurry”, he flung at me, snatching up his cap from the table.

I collected my things together quickly and went out. At the same time a troika drove briskly up to the steps of the porch. As I looked across to the forest I could see a carriage rapidly approaching in the distance. The rider stood up now and again to make some gestures over the driver’s back; I could make out arms being waved up and down. The slanting rays of the evening sun were reflected palely in buttons and shoulder straps.

Proskurov settled up with the driver who had brought him. The lad grinned with pleasure.

“Much obliged, your honour”.

“Have you told your pal there?” Proskurov pointed to the new driver.

“Yes, I know”.

“Well then”, he said, as he got into the carriage. “Make it in an hour and a half and there’s a rouble for you, but if you’re a minute later—you understand me . . . ?”

Thereupon the horses picked up their hooves, and Proskurov broke off without finishing the sentence.

VI

The purple sun was just touching the horizon as we rode up to the ravine. It was still light, although the dense evening shadows were already gathering ahead. It was cold and still. The “stone” stood silently above the mists and a pale full moon was rising over it. The black taiga lay in a trance, spell-bound, and not a single branch stirred. Only the sound of the hollow echo of a bell from the narrow gorge broke the silence. Behind us we could hear the same sound only fainter.

Smoke was rising from the bushes. Some peasant watchmen were sitting round a fire in gloomy silence. At the sight of us, they stood up and raised their

caps. The dead body lay to one side beneath a canvas shroud.

"Greetings, friends!" Proskurov began quietly.

"Hullo, your honour!" the peasants replied.

"Nothing's been moved has it?"

"No, just covered him up a bit—it's a nasty business alright . . . We didn't touch the animal".

"What animal?"

"There look. They shot his nag too. He was riding home horseback".

Sure enough a dead horse was lying by the roadside some 60 yards away. Proskurov began to survey the locality, taking the watchmen with him. I walked over to the dead man and raised the sheet from his face.

The deathly pale features were composed. The glazed eyes stared up into the evening sky while the face wore that expression of bewilderment and seeming inquiry which is sometimes seen in death as the last flicker of departing life. The face was clean, without a trace of blood.

A quarter of an hour later Proskurov and the peasants passed me, walking towards the cross-roads. The carriage which had been behind us drove up to meet them. From it stepped an elderly man in police uniform and a young medical assistant in mufti. The magistrate looked very tired. His broad chest was going up and down like a pair of bellows, and the whole of his fat body quivered beneath his short finely cut service greatcoat. His cheeks too were rising and falling which made the tips of his long, dyed moustaches stand on end one moment

and straggle off towards his ears the next. His abundant silvery grey curly hair was covered in dust.

"Phew", he exclaimed, panting and puffing. "Impossible to keep up with you, Afanasy Ivanovich. How are you?"

"My respects", answered Proskurov coldly. "There was no need to hurry. I could have waited".

"No, why should you? Phew! The service before everything. Don't like being kept waiting myself you know. Against my principles".

The magistrate spoke in a hoarse military bass voice, the sound of which involuntarily recalled the smell of rum and best quality tobacco. His eyes which were small and losing their sparkle though still quite lively and alert, were roaming round anxiously examining the scene. They came to rest on me.

"This is my friend, Mr. N.N.", Proskurov introduced me, "acting as my secretary for the time being".

"Heard about you, sir. Pleased to meet you. Staff-captain Bezrylov, retired".

Bezrylov saluted and clicked his spurs gallantly.

"Excellent. Now we can proceed with the investigation. Let's make it snappy, army style, while it's still light. Witnesses over here!"

The watchmen came over and we all walked across to the dead body. Bezrylov led the way very jauntily and tore off the whole sheet at one tug.

At the sight of what confronted us we all recoiled. The murdered man's chest was nothing but a gaping

wound, slashed and pierced in all directions. An instinctive horror gripped us at the sight of those marks of wanton bestiality. Each wound alone would have been fatal, and it was obvious that most of them had been inflicted on a dead body. Even Bezrylov quite lost his jauntiness. He stood still, holding the end of the sheet in his hand. His cheeks were purple, and the ends of his moustaches stood up menacingly like two spears.

"The scoundrels!" he uttered at last, and gave a deep sigh. Perhaps that sigh expressed regret that he had gone too far along the road of concealment and indulgence ever to turn back. He replaced the sheet without a word and turned to Proskurov, whose eyes had been glued upon him the whole time.

"Let's keep our descriptions till the post-mortem tomorrow", requested the magistrate, lowering his eyes. "We'll take a good look round now and remove the body to B".

"And then we can question the prisoner", said Proskurov stiffly.

Bezrylov's eyes shifted like a trapped animal's. "Prisoner? You've got a prisoner already? Why didn't you . . . how is it I didn't know about it?"

He cut a sorry figure for all his attempt to recover his poise. Glancing angrily at the peasants and his driver he turned to Proskurov again.

"Well done, sir. You don't waste any time. Good work!"

VII

After a little rest and a drink of tea, the officers began the inquest about midnight. In the middle of a fairly large room at a table furnished with writing materials sat Proskurov. His somewhat comic bounce had gone. He was stern and imposing. On his right sat Bezrylov who had now completely recovered, and had recaptured his army swagger. During the short respite he had washed, dyed his moustaches and fluffed up his grey curls. Altogether he was in excellent spirits. Taking sips of strong tea from a glass in front of him he looked at Proskurov with a condescending smile. I took a seat at the other end of the table.

“Bring in the prisoner”, ordered Proskurov, looking up from the sheet of paper on which he had scribbled down the procedure for interrogation. A moment later the door opened and in it stood silhouetted the tall figure of the man I had seen with Kostya on the ferry, pensively gazing at the clouds.

As he came in he tripped against the door step, looked down to see what had made him stumble, then walked into the middle of the room and stopped. His steps were smooth and unhurried. His broad face with its somewhat coarse though quite regular features expressed complete indifference. His blue eyes lacked lustre and stared vaguely ahead, as though blind to all immediately in front of them. His

head was shaven, peasant fashion. Traces of blood were visible on his new cotton shirt.

Proskurov handed me the "procedure form" and reaching for the ink pot and pen, began the customary interrogation.

"Name?"

"38-year-old Ivan".

"Place of residence?"

"No fixed place . . . tramp".

"38-year-old Ivan, are you guilty of the murder of Fedor Mikhailov, driver?"

"That's right, your honour, it was my doing. Plain enough isn't it?"

"Good for you!" approved Bezrylov.

"Don't waste time spinning it out, your honour. I'm not denying it".

"At whose command or instigation?" Proskurov continued, when the first replies had been noted down. "Where did you obtain the 50 roubles 32 copecks found on your person?"

The tramp eyed him thoughtfully.

"Better steer clear of that, your honour", he replied. "You know your job, I know mine. I was working on my own, that's all—just the dark night, mother taiga and me".

Bezrylov cleared his throat and swallowed half a glassful with relish, giving Proskurov a sardonic look. Then he eyed the tramp once more, obviously admiring his exemplary prison bearing as an old campaigner admires a young blood. Proskurov remained unruffled. Obviously he was not counting particularly on the tramp's honesty.

"Are you prepared to say", he went on with his

interrogation, "Why you so savagely mutilated your victim? Did you bear any personal hatred or malice towards the deceased?"

The prisoner looked at his questioner in astonishment.

"I knifed him a couple of times. No more. That finished him off".

"Constable, fetch a candle and give the prisoner a light", Proskurov said to a peasant. "Take a look in that room".

The tramp walked to the door with the same steady stride and paused. The peasant took one of the candles from the table and went into the next room.

Suddenly the tramp shuddered and reeled back. With obvious reluctance he braced himself to look a second time, then walked over to the wall opposite. We all watched him in a state of agitation aroused in us by that powerful, yet crushed and broken figure.

He was white. He stood for some time with bowed head, his shoulder leaning against the wall. Then he raised his head and looked at us in utter bewilderment.

"Your honour . . . orthodox peasants", he began in a pleading voice. "I never did it. Word of honour I didn't! Bit scared I was. Don't remember everything. But I couldn't 've done that—never".

Then suddenly he recovered his spirits. For the first time there was a glint in his eye.

"Your honour", he began firmly, as he walked up to the table, "put down: Kostya did it, Kostya with the slit nostril. It's him the swine. I'm dead certain. Nobody but him would 've made such mincemeat

of a man. It's his work. Pal or no pal, I don't care. Put it down, your honour!"

At this unexpected burst of frankness Proskurov snatched paper and pen from me and prepared to take it all down himself. With an obvious effort the tramp began to unfold to us the sordid drama.

He had escaped from N. where he had been imprisoned for vagrancy and for some time had loafed about idly until fate brought him to Kostya and company's "establishment". It was there for the first time that he heard talk of the late Mikhailov. "You can't finish off a man like Killer with a knife or bullet; he's got a charmed life". That's what they said. 'Nonsense', I says, 'gentlemen. I don't believe it. A sharp blade'll finish off any man'. 'Who are you?' they ask, 'where do you come from?' 'That's my business', I says. 'Prison's my father and the taiga my mother. That's where I come from and I don't like listening to soft talk'. Well, we got talking and one thing led to another. They welcomed me into their company and set up the drinks, and then Kostya says: 'If you're on the level', he says, 'why don't you do a trip with us?' 'Alright', I says. 'Fine', he says, 'we need a man. We've got a job to do in the ravine, day or night, we don't know when—there's a gent on his way from town with big money. You're not just bragging are you? If this gent's travelling with anyone else but Killer, we'll do the job and do it properly. But if it's Killer again . . . mind you don't beat it'. 'I shan't beat it', I says. 'Good', he says, 'if that's the way you feel you won't be sorry. There's a good reward going for Killer!'"

“Reward?” queried Proskurov. “From whom?”

“Listen to me while I’m talking mister; you can ask questions afterwards”, said the tramp. “Well I tell you, first time I did beat it. I got the wind up. My pals let me down, that’s why. Mikhailov came at us just with a whip but Kostya cleared off like a shot, gun and all. I backed out too, in a funk. Then he began to make fun of me, the swine. Got a biting tongue Kostya has. ‘Alright’ I says, ‘let’s go back. But if you beat it again, Kostya, it’ll be the last thing you’ll do!’ Three days we spent in the ravine waiting for him. About dusk on the third day he drove through. That meant he’d be back that night. We got ready: heard him trotting up on horseback. Kostya fired. The horse crumpled up. Mikhailov flung himself into the bushes—straight at me. My heart was knocking, I can tell you. It was either him or me. I ducked, stabbed at him with a knife and missed. He grabbed hold of my hand, snatched the knife and floored me. He was strong the dead man was. He pinned me down, took off his belt, tried to truss me up. But I had another knife in my boot. I reached for it furtively, turned over and caught him under the ribs. He gave a groan. He rolled me over on my back. He bent down. He looked into my eyes. ‘I felt this coming’, he said. ‘Now go your way and God be with you. Do no evil. This time you’ve finished me.’ I got up. He was in agony I could see. He tried to stand but it was no use. ‘Forgive me’, I said. ‘Go your way’, he answered. ‘I forgive you, though God may not’ . . . I went away and never went near again, on my honour. Kostya must have started on him after I’d finished”.

The tramp stopped and slumped down on the bench. Proskurov rapidly finished writing in complete silence.

"Now", he resumed, "make a clean breast of it all. Who was the merchant who was with you during the first attack, and on whose behalf did Kostya promise you a reward for murdering Fedor Mikhailov?"

Bezrylov looked glumly at the tramp, now on the verge of exhaustion. But the latter got up quickly from the bench and resumed his former air of careless indifference.

"That's all", he said firmly. "No more. That's enough. Got it all down about Kostya? Right, he won't play any more dirty tricks. Tell them to take me away, your honour, I've nothing else to say".

"Listen, 38-year-old Ivan", Proskurov said, "I consider it necessary to advise you that the fuller your confession is, the more lenient will be your treatment at the hands of the law. In any case you can't save your accomplices".

The tramp shrugged his shoulders.

"That's not my business, I don't care".

Clearly there was no hope of getting anything more out of him. They took him away.

VIII

There remained the cross-examination of the witnesses.

Bezrylov sat on the bench, his feet wide apart, drumming his fingers against the back of his hand.

As the peasants entered and took their places he watched them thoughtfully. Then surveying the whole crowd with a cold, contemptuous eye, he gave an almost imperceptible nod of the head and turned to Proskurov with a smile.

“By the way, Afanasy Ivanovich, I actually forgot to congratulate you on the good news. My apologies. All this fuss. Simply slipped out of my mind”.

“What is it?” asked Proskurov, without interrupting the reading of the evidence.

“What?” beamed Bezrylov. “Mean to say you don’t know? Don’t tell me I’m the first to have the pleasure of passing on the good news? Well, I’m very glad indeed”.

Proskurov looked up at the magistrate who had left his seat meanwhile with spurs jangling and an ingratiating smile.

“You have been appointed acting paymaster of N..sk. It is of course only a formality. There’s no doubt you’ll be made permanent eventually. Congratulations, old chap”, went on Bezrylov in his most hearty and well-meaning voice, seizing the startled Proskurov by the hand. “Heartiest congratulations”.

But Proskurov did not take kindly to this friendly greeting: he quickly withdrew his hand and jumped up.

“Excuse me, sir”, he began hurriedly and with a slight stammer. “It’s not the place for joking here. Certainly not the place. Do you think I don’t understand your tactics? You’re mistaken, sir. I’m no calf. No sir, no calf!”

“Whatever’s the matter, Afanasy Ivanovich!”, Bezrylov looked astounded and even spread out his

arms and looked round the room as though inviting all present to witness Proskurov's monstrous ingratitude. "I'm not joking, I wouldn't dare! It's an official appointment. Read the despatch myself I assure you. Nice little job, you know!", he continued, changing his tone and reverting to his friendly familiarity. "Won't have to bother about these unpleasant matters any more. I dare say though, unfortunately, we'll have to finish the present job without your invaluable assistance. Pity of course! Still I'm glad for your sake. It's a quiet, peaceful spot—ha-ha! Suit you down to the ground—ha-ha! Besides, the businessmen show their gratitude—ha-ha-ha!"

Bezrylov lost all restraint and his laugh which made his whole fat figure shake became positively indecent. Proskurov stood facing him like a statue, gripping the table with both hands. His face was drawn and yellow, and a look of bitter astonishment had frozen on it. At that moment alas he really did look like a calf.

The rest of the interrogation did not interest me in the slightest. I went out into the hall. There on a bench in a corner sat the villain of the piece. A few peasants stood guard nearby. I went over to the prisoner and sat beside him. He looked at me and moved up slightly.

"Tell me", I asked him, "didn't you really feel any enmity towards Mikhailov?"

The tramp stared at me with his calm blue eyes.

"Enmity?" he returned. "How could I? I'd never seen him before".

"Then why did you kill him? Surely not for the 50 roubles they found on you?"

“Of course”, he said thoughtfully. “The way we live, ten times that much wouldn’t last a week . . . and besides, I wondered if there really was a man who couldn’t be knifed to death”.

“Was it really worth killing a man just for curiosity and wrecking your own life?”

The tramp looked at me in astonishment.

“Life, you say? My life? What’s my life worth? I’ve just done Mikhailov in there, but it might have worked out different, he might have killed me”.

“No, he wouldn’t have killed you”.

“You’re right. He had the chance to. And he’d still have been alive”.

“Are you sorry for him?”

The tramp looked at me with hatred in his eyes.

“Clear off! What are you after?” he said, and then lowered his head and added: “It’s my line!”

“What is?”

“Just that. I’ve been in and out of prison since I was a kid”.

“Don’t you fear God?”

“God?” he smiled and shook his head. “I haven’t bothered about him for a long time. Maybe I should! Maybe he still owes me some of the things I prayed for. But I tell you what, mister”, he said, changing his tone. “I don’t need any of that stuff. Stop pestering me. I tell you—it’s my line. I’m talking to you now respectful like. But if we’d been in mother taiga or in that ravine that time, we might’ve been talking different because—well, it’s a different line”.

Once again he shook his fair hair.

“Got any tobacco, mister? I’m dying for a smoke”,

he began again in an off hand sort of way, though his tone seemed false to me.

I gave him a cigarette and went out on to the steps. The sun was rising behind the forest. The mists were lifting from the “stone” and floating westwards, over the ravine, skimming the tops of fir trees and cedars. The dew sparkled on the grass and through the nearby window glowed the yellow flames of the wax candles placed at the dead man’s head.

Appendix

After Siberia

AFTER completing three years in Amga, Korolenko was allowed to return to European Russia, where he took up residence at Nizhny Novgorod and married a woman who, like himself, had spent some time in exile. There he continued to live until 1896 as an author, journalist and public figure of great eminence. His literary laurels were soon won. His short stories including "Makar's Dream" and his longer works such as the "Blind Musician" and "In Bad Company" were enormously popular and were soon translated into several European languages. But Korolenko was not destined to emulate the great figures in Russian fiction; his energies were perhaps too dissipated, his inspiration perhaps too limited. While his literary output continued to be quite prolific in the late 1880's, he turned increasingly towards journalism and the study of Russian provincial life. Being born in an age when the *muzhik* and the *narod* were uppermost in the minds of the thinking and writing intelligentsia, Korolenko not only had in the peasant a topical theme, but a theme which satisfied his own humanitarian and publicist urges. Passionately interested in all manifestations of the life of the people he travelled widely in Central European Russia, investigating the state of cottage

industries or following a popular pilgrimage to a monastery, listening to the theological wranglings of sectarians or simply wandering on foot talking, sketching and recording conversations. As a writer his creative impulse was usually strongest when his subject concerned his own observations and first-hand impressions of peasant life.

In 1893 Korolenko visited America to attend the Chicago Exhibition, and was warmly acclaimed by the New York press not only as a victim of tsarist persecution, but with less justification as the possessor of a literary talent second only to that of Tolstoy in his own country. His impressions of America, recast so as to be the impressions of a simple Russian peasant unable to understand or be understood, are amusingly told in his novel "Tongueless". At home his name now caught the public eye more and more. He was active in organising relief in the great famine year of 1892. He carried out a press campaign against government interference in local administration. He publicly defended in the press and in court a group of Votyak subjects of the Russian empire unjustly condemned to death on charges of ritual murder—a cause célèbre in which his diligent assembling of evidence, journalistic zest and personal eloquence all combined to secure an acquittal. It was the abuse of legal methods of justice which most of all perhaps impelled him to write and act.

In 1896, Korolenko left Nizhny Novgorod for Petersburg, but he never settled down in the capital, and the turn of the century saw his return to the provinces for good—this time to Poltava in his native

Ukraine. Apart from visits abroad mainly for health reasons and an enforced absence from Russia during the early part of the First World War, he remained in Poltava, a "provincial", for the rest of his life. His position as editor of "Russian Wealth" in succession to the famous sociologist Mikhailovsky absorbed his energies for many years as belles-lettres gave more and more ground to urgent publicist claims. Among the latter may be mentioned the cause of the Jewish victims of the pogroms, the fate of the peasants in his own province beaten and shot by the police and the whole problem of the death penalty which he vehemently attacked in a pamphlet enthusiastically hailed by Tolstoy in a personal letter of thanks to the author. In 1900, Korolenko was elected an honorary Academician as a mark of his services to Russian letters. Not long afterwards he resigned the honour, and persuaded Chekhov to do the same, in protest against the Tsar's decision to veto Maksim Gorky's election to the Academy on political grounds. He was never influenced in what he said or did by fear of retribution, and he championed many liberal causes where prudence might have warned him to keep silent. His major literary work of the later years of his life was the four-volumed "History of My Contemporary", which despite its title is primarily an autobiography, an uneven and at times monotonous document which does scant justice to the life of a man who was modest to a fault, and which in any case is not continued beyond his Siberian exile. His last days were darkened by ill-health and the sufferings of the Civil War, a calamity which only seemed to redouble his protests

and revitalise his energy as he struggled on, censuring the cruelty of Reds and Whites alike, and interceding for the lives of the victims of each change of military fortune. Not long before his death in 1921, he conducted a bitter correspondence (never published in the Soviet Union) with Lunacharsky, the People's Commissar for Education, and here he took his stand firmly and finally against Cheka atrocities, the shooting of hostages and the constant vilification of the bourgeoisie.

Korolenko's influence in Poltava was legendary and his voice was not heard in the provinces alone. Numerous people sought his help, not only on literary matters (Gorky often referred to the debt he owed to Korolenko), and he never refused anyone. As a writer his merits include a musical style, a wide command of language and the ability to tell a good tale. Sentimentality, sententiousness and a lack of depth may be counted among the shortcomings of his major works. As a man he earned the respect and devotion of the Russian public at large and drew even from his harshest literary critics a unanimous admiration as one who was felt to embody the "conscience of the Russian people".

R. F. C.

